

The Spectrum

Edition **121** January 2025



produced
by and for
autistic
people



About the Spectrum

The Spectrum is produced by and for autistic adults. We welcome submissions on any topic from autistic people who are over 18.

The Spectrum is published quarterly, in January, April, July and October, in print and online.

To submit an item to *the Spectrum*, please go to **www.autism.org.uk/theSpectrum** and follow the link to submit your work.

Although most issues are themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the magazine's content will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel and for fitting the space available.

Please note that *the Spectrum* receives many submissions 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.

Pieces that appear in *the Spectrum* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests an alias. This is done to protect their privacy.

The National Autistic Society promotes *the Spectrum* on social media using pieces selected from the magazine.

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

The Spectrum online version is available at **www.autism.org.uk/theSpectrum**

You can email *the Spectrum* at **spmag@nas.org.uk**

History

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 lack of services for autistic people and the potential for self-help and networking as a means of support.

The purpose of the magazine was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at.

The name *the Spectrum* was suggested by dozens of people and chosen in an online poll in 2018.

Former Editors and Sub-editors are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce and the Goth.

In 2024, Fiona and Charlotte, autistic members of the National Autistic Society's Content team, became joint editors.



Welcome to the January issue

Hello readers,

Once again, apologies for the delay on the magazine.

The magazine is, as ever, full of brilliant artwork, articles, poems and stories by autistic people. We hope you enjoy it.

We have a theme for the April issue. As it will be World Autism Acceptance Month, we invite you to submit work on acceptance.

Remember to complete a permissions form for your submission, as we can't publish anything without it.

Please submit your work via: www.autism.org.uk/the-spectrum/submit-work

Yours,

Fiona and Charlotte

the Editors

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Being a highly empathetic person ruins my ability to watch television

By Victoria

© Victoria 2025



Article

Content warning: this article mentions self-harm

It's a common misconception that autistic people are unable to feel empathy. In reality, it can be a complex mix: sometimes, it's felt too much, sometimes not at all. In my case, while it's true that I often can't relate to someone if they're in front of me sharing their emotions or an experience with me, I would still consider myself a highly empathetic person.

If you don't know what a 'highly empathetic person' is (or can't work it out from its name), it's someone who is highly attuned to the emotions of those around them. They absorb the feelings of others, developing a deeper connection. While this has many advantages, it also comes with some drawbacks, including taking on the weight of emotions that aren't even mine to begin with.

With this in mind, I have to admit that my empathy doesn't kick in when it's probably needed most. Although I'm currently studying a counselling skills course (which has taught me a lot about empathy I didn't understand before), I still have trouble truly understanding the motivations of others - because, let's be honest, if you're not dealing with something the way I would, then are you even dealing with it correctly?!

For me, my highly empathetic nature kicks in in the most unlikely scenarios - when I'm watching TV. It sounds ridiculous, but it's true. The first instance of this I remember vividly was when I watched the TV series *My mad fat diary*, starring the wonderful Sharon Rooney and Jodie Comer, when I was in my early 20s (and then undiagnosed). Although I've never had issues with my weight, I have long suffered from body dysmorphia (and

also kept a diary) like Rae, so many of her messed-up thoughts of self-loathing and self-harm are things I, too, have experienced. So, watching this series would often leave me feeling low afterwards without really understanding why.

But the emotions didn't stop there. I absorbed every awkward or embarrassing moment, feeling everything so intensely that I needed to get up and leave the room in the hope that when I returned, I'd be welcomed back with something more light-hearted. I still do this even now, either leaving the room while something is playing or fast-forwarding to what looks like a more manageable scene. If something feels too emotionally heavy, I have to control how much of it I actually take in. In some cases, I'll have to stop watching something altogether.

The most recent example of this was when my partner and I watched Demi Moore's new horror movie, *The substance*. You just know that when one of the first scenes is Dennis Quaid vulgarly munching on seafood in the middle of a restaurant, it's going to be an uncomfortable experience. It's a long movie too (though, let's be real, anything nearing two hours is pushing it for me), and I'm not sure we even made it 45 minutes in before I had to request it be switched off. Not only did I deeply feel Demi Moore's disgust with herself at getting older and becoming 'less desirable', but I also understood the lengths we as women go through as we age to maintain our youthful looks. It was like watching an exaggerated, grotesque version of an all-too-familiar fear. And when the younger version of herself is

literally stitching up her body, that was it for me. My empathy meter was at full capacity, and I had to tap out.

So, why is it that I can feel so little when someone is in front of me telling me about the emotions they're feeling, yet when I'm watching a fictional portrayal of someone experiencing similar emotions, I'm overwhelmed? Why does my empathy seem to have such a strange on/off switch?

I suppose it's hard for me to really know, but I see it similarly to when I'm reading a book. I'm not an overly visual thinker, so it's difficult for me to envision a scenario to the point where I'm emotionally invested. However, when there's a dramatised depiction of these feelings happening in front of me, being able to physically see the emotions on a person's face (something I rely on a lot in everyday life, as I often struggle with tone of voice) and how they're reacting to an

uncomfortable or distressing situation, it reminds me of the many (many) times I've been in similar situations.

I hope whoever reads this doesn't think that if they ever shared something deeply personal and emotional with me, I wouldn't care. I do care - I just might not show it in the way people expect. I'm actively trying to reprogram the part of my brain that assumes everyone should act and feel in ways that have often felt right for me. I may not be able to truly empathise with you like I do with Elisabeth Sparkle or Rae, but I am trying to understand more about what it means to be in someone else's frame of reference. And who knows, maybe one day, I'll be able to absorb the emotions of real people the way I do the characters on the telly.

.....

Shape

By Cleland Faraday

© Cleland Faraday 2025

today, you asked me to be a circle (even though I was a square)
so I became a circle.

then, you asked me to be a triangle
so I cut myself in half to be a triangle.

after that, you wanted me to be a rectangle
so I stretched myself out to be a rectangle;
my sides hurt from the movement
but I did it anyway because you wanted it.

I became so many shapes that I didn't know which one I was anymore,

so I turned away from you and became the shape I wanted to be

and found that I was much more beautiful.



Our lass

By Alex

© Alex 2025



Play

By Charlotte

© Charlotte 2025

This badge shows a cartoon drawing of four people with a speech bubble.

In the speech bubble, it says, 'We can play too!'

I made this badge at a 'Creative workshop for researchers' event I attended as part of my PhD.

I am an Autistic woman, teacher, and student.

My PhD explores Autistic girls' experiences of mainstream school.

I created this badge to respond to a comment made by a teacher and former colleague of mine.

She argued that Autistic people don't play 'properly'.

'WE CAN PLAY!' I thought immediately.

As a researcher, I became curious about what is meant by play.

Isn't play simply the act of having fun?

I'm Autistic and I have fun, therefore I play.

Perhaps our fun isn't the same as yours.

Perhaps you don't think

reading non-fiction books,

finding new airports on maps,

collecting buttons,

organising and re-organising,

learning bird names,

Colour coding your wardrobe ... etc

is fun.

But maybe fun and play are just as unique as human life and experience.

We can play.



Meditations on autism

By Calanthe Burgess

© Calanthe Burgess 2025



For the longest time, I didn't understand why I struggled with things that seemed effortless for others. Social interactions, loud noises, crowded spaces, unpredictable situations – they all felt like insurmountable obstacles. I spent years masking, desperately trying to fit into a world that wasn't built for people like me. It left me resentful, frustrated that I tried so hard but got so little back in return. My unique and interesting gifts, my quirky personality, weren't celebrated in any meaningful way.

I had such a hard time making friends, but at the time, I felt nothing for them. I didn't understand what the big deal was. It was only when I got older that I realised how important it is to make people like you, not just for companionship, but for survival. We're a social species – we need each other for help, support, and information. But as a child and even into my teens, it didn't click for me. I was always an observer, never quite understanding the hidden rules of social interaction. I used to think everyone else had some kind of secret language, something I wasn't taught.

Glenn from the novel *Oryx and Crake* was one of the few characters I truly related to. Margaret Atwood subtly coded him as autistic, and his way of thinking, his detachment from the emotional chaos of the world, mirrored how I often felt. She even named him after Glenn Gould, an eccentric pianist who many suspect was autistic. This should have been my first clue that I am autistic.

When I was diagnosed with autism, it didn't solve everything, but it finally gave me answers. As someone who enjoys finding an answer to every question,

it explained so much: my detachment from the rest of the world, my struggles to connect, and why I felt like I was observing life from a distance. For the longest time, I told myself I was an *Übermensch*, someone above the fray of typical human concerns, but in hindsight, I think it was just a way to make myself feel better about being constantly rejected. It was easier to believe I was superior than to confront the pain of not finding anyone to love you.

One of the most frustrating things about being on the spectrum with low support needs is that people assume I'm 'normal' at first glance, but I'm really not. I navigate the world differently, and when people realise this, they sometimes feel misled or even cheated, like I've hidden something from them. Most people don't even believe I am autistic because it doesn't match their expectations of what autism 'should' look like.

The double bind of my particular type of autism is that because it's not obvious, people either think I'm lying for attention or trying to get out of trouble. They don't see the mental exhaustion, the sensory overload, or the constant effort it takes to mask. Being autistic really does affect me, deeply, but so few are willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. It's an invisible struggle, one that I often feel like I have to prove to others, which only adds to the isolation.

Sometimes, I wish the entire world would disappear, leaving just me and other autistic people on this planet. I imagine that maybe we'd all get along better – but something tells me this wouldn't necessarily be the case. People are multifaceted and can't be reduced to just

their brain structure or diagnosis. After all, not every autistic person is the same. Even within our shared neurodivergence, there are differences - just like in any other group. While it's comforting to think of a space where I'd feel completely

understood, I realise that our uniqueness goes beyond autism. We're individuals, and our ability to connect with one another depends on more than just shared brain structures.

Away with the fairies

By Kiera

© Kiera 2025



Run, run you little fairy
Run far and keep on looking ahead,
Find you sanctuary within the trees
Give them your confidence instead
Spill your secrets to the dying leaves
Fill them up with all of your dread
Then watch as they begin to seep
Out of your pure and fragile head.

Wear your golden tiara with pride
Even if it's heavier than you express,
You feel your mask cracking at the seams
But you keep up with it nonetheless.
You, mirror of mine, are far too young
To put up with all this stress
But you will. It seems you have no choice,
In a world where you can all but guess.

And when that shielding sun begins to set
Your safety leaves, you're afraid of the dark
You sleep with hidden monsters in your bed
As they riot for your hopeful spark.
Oh darling, they might break you down
With cruel words and a thousand remarks
You try to fight but it's not in your nature
That's not the path you should embark.

And so, you run, you run, you little fairy
With your ponytails and crystallised eyes
You might try to save your little tears,
As a sacrifice for the night skies.
But the starry eyed, they all lose their spark
When they begin to bottle up their lies
So one day, you'll grab ahold of that honest nature,
And let the daylight hear your cries.

Sticky labels can cover up autism

By Anya

© Anya 2025



Article

Content warning: this article mentions self-harm and hospitalisation for an eating disorder

I had to fight for my autism diagnosis. I wish it had been more straightforward, and hope that by sharing my story, others who follow may find the path slightly easier.

I reached the age of 46 with no awareness that I might be autistic. While I had always felt different from a young age, my home was unusual too. My dad was a compulsive hoarder and filled rooms with piles of memorabilia and newspapers. We seldom had visitors, such as tradespeople or friends. I was very sensitive, anxious and self-conscious as a child and walked on my tiptoes. I started dieting to lose weight as I felt large compared to my peers. I later dropped out of university and spent nearly five years in hospitals and eating disorder units.

Highly vulnerable, I looked to those treating me as authority figures and gave up my own agency. I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) when I didn't fully recover from anorexia. The BPD diagnosis was made by a psychiatrist because I self-harmed. No doctor referred to the other diagnostic criteria for BPD (there are nine and you need to meet five of them) or heard my account of why I felt out of place. I hurt myself due to overwhelm and my need for control. I learnt more serious self-harm from observing other inpatients, though I since regret copying their actions in the mistaken hope that I might be taken more seriously. BPD and self-harm attract stigma and mental health professionals often lacked compassion towards me since I didn't have a psychotic illness.

Voluntary work in an advice charity helped me a great deal. I was too afraid to take on paid work, having been dismissed by an employer for telling them that I was in crisis. I still needed mental health services for life guidance and to support my ongoing entitlement to welfare benefits. Services were keen to push me back to the GP surgery, though they said I would need to pay for therapy, preferably with a psychologist who could deal with my complexity.

I did find my way into full-time work when I was aged 33 after meeting a brilliant employment adviser who worked for the local council. She saw my potential and supported me to apply for entry level jobs. Paid work provided structure and purpose, though I remained insecure. The work itself was fine, and it was dealing with people that I found hardest.

This year, I experienced burnout in a new job where the reality differed from the job description. I was seeing a private psychologist who asked if I thought I could be autistic. At first it seemed impossible given the number of mental health professionals I had seen who insisted that I 'only' had BPD. I became more convinced as I realised that my dad, who died over a decade ago, had so many characteristics of autism, but this went undetected in his generation and mine until more recent years. I knew that I wanted to seek a formal diagnosis but needed to avoid the same type of psychiatrists who never delved deeper and refused to review the BPD diagnosis during the last 23 years.

I paid for a private autism diagnostic assessment, choosing two practitioners who feature on the BBC documentary *Christine McGuinness: Unmasking my autism*. I still feared invalidation in case I didn't meet the threshold for diagnosis. I also had to act as my own informant due to family circumstances and it was demanding to trawl through my memories. My assessment was affirming, thorough and trauma informed. The outcome has changed my life.

There will be readers, most likely women or those assigned female at birth, who have also been misdiagnosed with a personality disorder, perhaps decades ago, particularly BPD (now called emotionally unstable personality disorder). It is a cruel situation to be in where you can't define your own identity and the entire health system views you as a difficult case. I don't yet know a way to get BPD and 'dependent personality disorder' removed from my medical records.

Through the lens of a personality disorder, our autistic traits, often heightened by

trauma, are repackaged as impulsivity, dependency, anger, manipulation and poor coping. Psychiatrists appear to prefer the diagnosis of personality disorder to autism, since it is in their toolkit and needs no evidence. While the BPD diagnosis can lead to psychological therapies on the NHS, these are often in groups based on neurotypical conventions such as mentalising (thinking what others are thinking, even though no one seems to care what the patient thinks).

My view is that autism, anxiety and complex trauma explain far more for me than BPD ever could, though I fully respect anyone who finds their diagnosis useful. We need to choose the terms that make sense to us. Since gaining a diagnosis of autism, I start life again with greater self-knowledge. I embrace my differences, limitations and self-care. I was, and always will be, a unique, caring, shy and gifted autistic female.

Autism is a part of me

By Alexander

© Alexander 2025

Autism is a part of me,
A different way to simply be.
I see the world in shades so bright,
In patterns, colours and in light.

I may be quiet, but I feel it all,
A world of wonder, both big and small.
With every step, I find my way,
Autism is me, and that's okay.



Next issue's theme:

To celebrate World Autism Acceptance Month, we are asking you to submit work on acceptance.

Hold.On.Pain.Ends

By Sally

© Sally 2025

Artwork



Miss O'Phonia

By Spencer

© Spencer 2025

Artwork



Rules for being autistic: A satirical guide to navigating the neurotypical world

By Grace

© Grace 2025



Satirical, slightly ranty article incoming...

Hello, and congratulations on discovering you are autistic. We hope you enjoy your long overdue journey of self discovery. Before you begin, we'd just like to go over a few ground rules on navigating the neurotypical world as an autistic person. We promise this won't take long, but you may want to sit down for a moment to digest this information. Ready? Okay, here we go.

Autism is something to be accepted and even celebrated. You should see it as a superpower that can help you contribute to the world in a meaningful way. It is also something that needs prompt intervention and treatment at the first warning sign, and people are looking at potentially eradicating it altogether in the future.

Try not to come across as obviously autistic, because people won't treat you like a person. At the same time, if you hide it too well, people won't believe you when you say you are struggling. It's up to you to get the balance right.

Remember, it's okay to be autistic. It's just not okay to have unusual interests, need extra help with anything, struggle to understand neurotypicals, learn differently, communicate differently, stim or misinterpret people.

You ideally need to disclose your autism so that people are aware and can understand. However, if they treat you differently or withhold opportunities from you, then you've basically brought that on yourself by telling them.

People who make adjustments for you

are heroes and saints who deserve a gold medal and a round of applause. It's best not to go into how much you have to bend and adapt for neurotypicals on a daily basis, though. After all, you don't want to sound self-pitying, do you?

Most people experience sensory discomfort in certain situations. When you experience this, however, it's just you being too sensitive.

It's okay to ask questions if you don't understand something. Just not too many questions, or at the wrong time, and for the love of all that is sacred, do not ask about anything you should already know about.

There is no shame in needing support - but come on, you shouldn't need support with X, Y or Z. No one else does!

On that note, **if you do have trouble with something your peers don't, you should explain why.** But just so you know, doing this does count as making excuses, and nobody wants to hear that.

Being autistic means you are inherently bad at communication and understanding people. However, you still need to put in all the work towards learning everyone else's communication styles and adapting yours accordingly, because it's not fair to expect everyone else to go easy on you.

Try to communicate more clearly, but no one will tell you how. You have to already know what they are expecting you to say and how they are expecting you to say it.

It's important to be friendly and open so that people will like you. Although, they

won't like it if you overshare, so try not to do that.

You need to get better at reading between the lines and picking up on unspoken expectations and motives... but seriously, stop overthinking everything!

And finally, one last thing to remember is that none of these rules apply all the time, but any of them could apply at any time. We're not going to ask if you have any questions, because everything should be perfectly clear by now. If in doubt, just be yourself - as long as it's the conventional,

not-too-sensitive, sociable, compliant, superpowered, neurotypical-passing version of yourself that everyone wants to see. Thank you for taking the time to learn, and on behalf of everyone here at NeuroNormative Development, best of luck on your journey!

Disclaimer: we cannot take liability for any rules not included on this list. If you accidentally break any, you are fully responsible for whatever confusing emotional reactions from other people this may cause.

Sad

By Michael

© Michael 2025

Artwork



Boy George - age of elegance

By Eugenio

© Eugenio 2025

Artwork



I deserve

By Charlotte

© Charlotte 2025

I deserve to see the stars
And wake up to blue sky
To lay in bed til ten at weekends
Without being asked why

I deserve to breathe deep
Fill my life with air
So much space to give myself grace
Laugh and dance without care

I deserve to get to know myself
The me from before, at nineteen
She's colourful and beautiful
And doesn't mind being seen

I deserve to feel strong
And achieve any of my goals
To surround myself with people
Who support and feel my soul

I deserve to be authentic
And unashamedly me
I get to choose who that is
Now that I'm finally free



Spring ball

By Tadgh

© Tadgh 2025

Putting the assignments away
For an opportunity to dine
Though more exams lay ahead
The youngsters queue in line

Too many people to acquaint
Too few options on the menu
The humidity of this venue
Makes one almost faint

What can be heard from the door
Breaking of a glass
Through the soaked hardwood floor
A dichotomy, rather crass

With music rather loud
And patrons pouring gin
Overwhelmed by the crowd
Stone walls are caving in

As evening moves to night
Involving the exchange of cash
Light reflects upon the caviar
From high windows of sash



Gleaming hour

By Sarah-Jayne

© Sarah-Jayne 2025



Overwhelming

By Sam

© Sam 2025



The world outside is loud, too bright,
A whirlwind filled with endless light,
Voices clash and traffic roars,
Each sound another slamming door.
The colours burn, too vivid, sharp,
Each corner hides a different spark.
The hum of crowds, the brush of skin,
It all collides and swirls within.
A thousand thoughts, a million things,
No space to breathe, my senses sing,
The rush, the buzz, it doesn't stop,
It's like a flood I cannot block.
Each face I see, each word I hear,
A tangled knot of unseen fear,

The world expects, but doesn't see,
How overwhelming it can be.
I long for quiet, soft and slow,
A place where time's allowed to flow.
Where noise is calm, and light is kind,
A space to ease my racing mind.
In stillness, I can find my way,
To breathe, to think, to feel okay,
But out there, it's a storm, a spin,
A world that presses from within.
Though I'm adrift in chaos' stream,
Inside, I hold my quiet dream,
Of peace, of space, a world less wide,
A calmer place where I can hide.

How to subscribe to the print magazine

A subscription will pay for printed issues of the magazine (four) a year.

To subscribe, you can:

- visit our online shop at www.autism.org.uk/shop/products/magazines/the-spectrum
- email our Supporter Care team at: supportercare@nas.org.uk and they will send you a subscription form
- or call our Supporter Care team on 0808 800 1050.

If you move house, please email supportercare@nas.org.uk and include your name and your new and old address.

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I see you

By Johanna

© Johanna 2025

Artwork



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