The Spectrum

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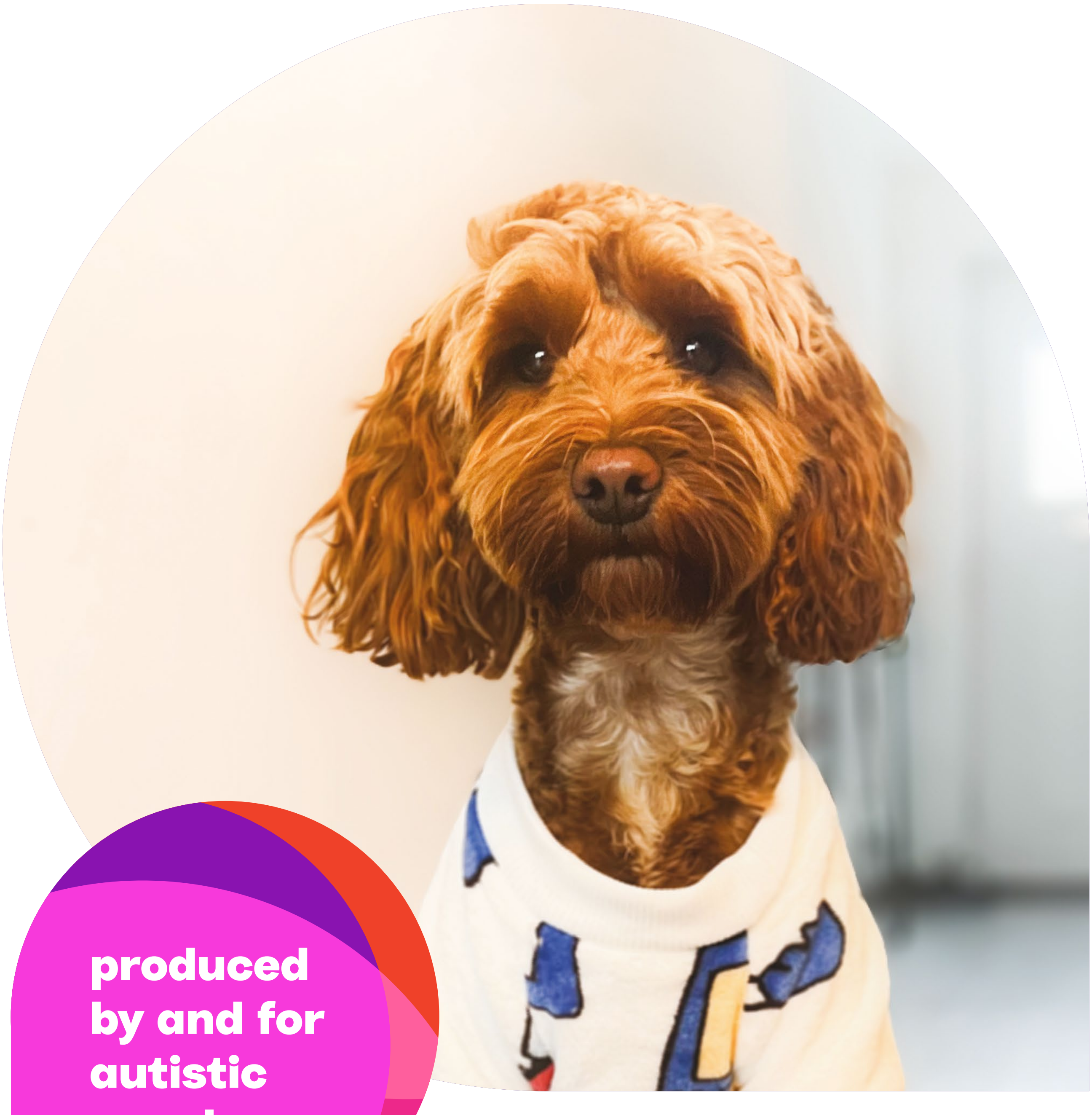

produced by and for autistic people

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 **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 **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.

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

In 2024, Fiona and Charlotte, autistic members of the National Autistic Society's Content team, became joint editors. In October 2025, Helen, another autistic member of staff, took over from Charlotte as Co-editor.

Welcome to the January issue

Welcome to the first issue of *the Spectrum* in 2026, or more accurately, issue 125. The Gregorian New Year is so ingrained in our cultural landscape, but it can sometimes feel like an arbitrary reset. Not everyone adopts the ‘new year, new me’ mentality, and your editors are both slightly baffled by the idea of New Year’s resolutions. In fact, the return to normality after the busy holiday period may be exactly what many of us have been waiting for. It’s okay to crave and celebrate the stability of the everyday, even for those of us who enjoy the holidays. With this in mind, we would like to suggest a theme for the next issue, which you can find on page 17.

Thank you for your submissions on this issue’s theme of Preserving joy. Autistic joy can feel like a lifeforce, a solace and an essential form of self-expression. It’s truly a delight to bear witness to this joy, and we hope the following issue brings you some joy as well.

Yours,

Fiona and Helen

Contents

Article

Preserving joy

By N

There is nothing more pleasurable than finding joy in life. I love watching sunrises in autumn, as the sky becomes blood red on a clear morning. The joy in clearing the roadsides of litter when out on the moors and leaving them in a better state. Not that they last long, though, ten minutes is the record between my clearing a section and litter being dropped. This also allows me the pleasure of driving a classic Land Rover around, and at this time of year, being able to enjoy the warmth of the diesel heater. Plus, I confess to feeling smug when watching others scrape and spray de-icer while I enjoy a coffee and let the heater thaw out Lucy (my Land Rover).

I find joy in meeting others on the spectrum in the many National Autistic Society online groups. I also love meeting and chatting on café stops while out cycling. Cycling and the sheer freedom of the road really does bring joy, even though I find it hard due to dyspraxia, but I love a fast descent while crouching low on the bike to go faster. Plus, you can eat cake and not feel guilty, knowing you will burn off those calories on a ride home. This is my excuse, and I am sticking to it. I find joy in looking after Lucy and keeping her on the road. I am just completing a big project to remove the gearbox and have it rebuilt, as it was getting worn. Plus, it gave me a chance to paint areas and parts that are hidden. I do like the engineering involved, not that I rebuilt the box. I thought about it but knew I would get so far and then struggle, and I had a fear of putting parts back wrong and only realising at 55mph on an A-road when it went bang.

I do enjoy a visit to a transport museum, be it road or planes. I had the recent pleasure of a trip to Imperial War Museum Duxford to see the only SR-71 Blackbird outside the US. Sheer joy to see a legendary plane up close, as well as a U-2. As I realised on the way home, that will be the closest I ever get to Area 51, where both planes were tested. I had my first Uber trip courtesy of a best friend. No mere standard car for us, as he managed to book a Mercedes S Class, and we were fascinated by the digital display. I would be too scared to drive it, as I would crash due to looking at the screen, not the road. Plus, Lucy would never forgive me. I am so used to solo travel, so having a friend along was a joy too. Very helpful when panicking over the ticket machine when collecting the tickets, grabbing hold of me when I went flying on the Underground. Sorry about that, if you were in the carriage, but dyspraxia struck when I was trying to sit down when the train moved. And for being calm when I was overloaded at Euston when trying to decide where to go for a hot drink, with so much choice and pricing. I once made the mistake of trying to buy bananas from a Euston Station shop, I know, but I am from the Midlands. Fairtrade? No, more like gold-plated.

Joy in watching the antics of the local cats. I moved a cover yesterday only to find a disgruntled cat had crawled in to sleep, but we made up and hopefully will still be friends. There is a strict timetable for each cat to walk around the street, and for the most part, this is respected, but sometimes there is a standoff and a lot of howling. Two tom cats explore my garden and bump into one another, but I do wish this were not at 4am. They fight and slam each other into my door, and I have had to separate them before. I have had to laugh, as I once returned home from a ride and had just opened the door to see a flash of ginger fur run past. Of course, Max had a tour of my home and miaowed at every door until I opened it.

I am told he has invited himself into other homes, cheeky puss!

The joy in reading, as I have never owned a TV nor want to. I read non-fiction mainly, as I get confused over characters in fiction. I am lucky, as I live near a wonderful bookshop that has a large selection of books, often at less than the jacket price. Not that I am mean, but when faced with such books, I find it hard to stick to my budget. There is a travelling library, which is useful in a rural area, so that keeps me in reading material too. I find joy in opening up the latest copy of *Private Eye*, as I am a subscriber and love the humour and good journalism. I do enjoy reading a newspaper, which sadly seems to be a rare habit now. So in short, it is the joy in the little things in life that bring pleasure to me.

Article

Angel - my joy

By Reign Bow

My joy comes with four legs and a waggy tail.

Angel, my four-year-old ginger fluffy cockapoo, is the source of all my joy. Technically my assistance dog, Angel is more than that - more than a dog, more than my family; she is my everything, my joy. In April of 2022 (a very dark time in my life), in and out of hospital and institutions, I felt hopeless. On the 13th of that month, I met Angel for the very first time. I had a choice of two dogs, and funnily enough, I actually chose the dog that wasn't Angel. Angel had other ideas, though, and stumbled up on my lap and started to kiss me. She chose me. She knew what I needed, and what I needed was an angel to save me, to give me a reason to get up in the morning and to give me JOY. It's been magic ever since.

Fast forward, and Angel and I are inseparable. She has enabled me to do things I once couldn't face. We go shopping together, take train rides, visit coffee shops (she's partial to a pup cup or two) and get out and about to social groups.

Angel is so protective of me and so sensitive to my needs. She doesn't leave my side. I'm never alone, and she's always there to give me a cuddle when things get too much.

We have so much fun together, and she loves treasure hunts. I hide her treats all around our home, and she runs around frantically sniffing them all out. She loves the beach, especially when it's warm enough to go swimming. Going to my crochet club on a Wednesday is one of Angel's highlights, as she gets cuddles, love and attention from all the ladies and sometimes treats too.

Thank you, Angel, for giving me a reason to live. You are my sunshine. You are my Joy. I love you today, tomorrow and always.

You can see lovely Angel on the front cover of the magazine.

Article

A year since my autism diagnosis: What I have learned (and laughed at)

By Anna

Deep down, I always knew I was different. It often felt like everyone else got the 'how to do life' manual, and I turned up without the reading list. I could never understand why others appeared to breeze through things that left me completely overwhelmed.

One of my earliest clues was at primary school. I was dragged out of assembly by a stern nun, the headteacher, for laughing at an inappropriate moment. A habit that has followed me. She asked what I thought my mum would say when she called her. I said, quite innocently: "She'll say 'hello'." It didn't go down well. I was confused. I'd answered the question!

Sensory struggles are by far the biggest hurdle in my journey with autism. One whiff of a bad toilet, smelly food or gym body odour, and I'm finished. My face shrivels, my appetite vanishes and I lose all focus. Growing up, I couldn't stand the sight of bones, milk, fish or mingling textures, like dry and wet food mixing. My parents thought I was being naughty, but really, I was plotting my survival. At age five, I hid food in plant pots, in the finest china crockery cupboard and under the school dinner table. Misunderstood? Completely.

I'm a sensitive soul. Sudden noises, loud eating, bright lights and crowded spaces can feel like an attack on my senses, which is ironic because I'm a proud Londoner. My most stressful moment isn't the big project meeting or a presentation, it's crossing Waterloo Station, where I feel like a swarm of ants is charging toward me, all in slow motion. I've still not found that shortcut.

Since my diagnosis, I've learned that change doesn't have to be terrifying if I meet it with patience. Unexpected change floods my regimented brain with worry. I thrive on structure and routine and need it to function. This summer, I swapped my old gym routine for a new one after realising my comfort zone wasn't serving me anymore. Thanks to my PT, I joined what I affectionately call a "big man gym". At first, I hated it. The machines looked like torture devices, everyone seemed confident and I felt invisible. But slowly, with time, stubbornness and after a few meltdowns, I found my rhythm.

Social cues are my weak spot. I've unknowingly spent years masking and mimicking others, learning how to fit into a neurotypical world. I'm still me, but sometimes I borrow bits of other people's coping strategies to survive tricky moments.

When it comes to how autism affects me, the truth is I'm scared of rejection and letting people down, more than myself. The thought of a surprise party or gesture of kindness in my honour makes me want to crawl under a rock, as does the fear of being thought of. However reserved I can be, don't underestimate me! I'm not shy, and my values always win. I accept others for who they are. I'll speak up for others, defend what's right and stand my ground when it matters. Wrong and strong, yes, I can be! With a sprinkle of defiance that makes me chuckle.

Getting my diagnosis at 41 brought a storm of emotions. Anger, sadness, relief and grief for the girl who didn't know why she struggled so much. The hardest part was realising the stigma came from me toward myself. Feelings of self-loathing were intense. I'm still unlearning that.

On good days, autism feels like a superpower. I can hyperfocus, execute tasks with precision, spotting the tiniest details and delivering work that's sharp and thorough. On bad days, I can shut down and struggle to process, seeking solace in the predictable taste of beige food and quiet time, under the comfort of a weighted blanket. Thankfully, those days are rarer, as I'm better at spotting the warning signs.

A big part of that growth is thanks to my therapist. Her patience, humour and kindness have helped me understand myself in ways I never thought possible. She's encouraged me to breathe, talk and start feeling more confident in myself, accepting the many foibles that make me, me. I'll always be grateful for that safe space.

I still have a way to go, but the diagnosis gave me something precious: understanding. It's helped me break down the stigma I carried and view myself through a kinder lens. Autism isn't something to fix or be ashamed of; it's part of who I am. And now, I'm slowly learning to love that person fully.

Joy - before and after

Artwork

By Rooby

Article

The joy of autism

By Sandra

Yes, I said it, the Joy. I grow weary of all the doom and gloom articles.

We Autistics can be wickedly funny and sarcastic, and will take the mick out of ourselves in the right setting, often our favourite Facebook group.

We may call ourselves 'neurospicy' and drolly blame things on 'the 'tism'.

The groups I have joined are full of smart, self-aware people who warmly welcome newcomers to the group, answering questions, soothing fears, posting memes and declaring their new spin (special interest) when the mood takes, asking for fellow enthusiasts to chime in if they have the spoons.

I posted the following on all my FB groups, curious about other people's experiences:

"I'm writing an article about the great, wonderful, fantastic things about being autistic - the hidden joys if you will (also known as "Glimmers")

(Fun Fact: Mick Jagger and Keith Richards used the pseudonym "The Glimmer Twins" for production work on many Rolling Stones albums)

For example, I am hypermobile and very flexible, and my partner and I both enjoy that.

Anything you would like to add?"

Here are their responses:

"Hyperlexia (advanced reading skills and abilities from a young age)."

"Turning your special interest into your job, and excelling at it."

"Supersonic hearing and smelling."

"Outstanding memory."

"Synesthesia (words and numbers have colours)."

"Creative vision."

"Knowing how to support Autistic children through our own lived experience."

"We can spot another Autistic, even if they don't realise yet."

"Super problem solver/debugger."

"Can read and write upside down."

"Intense enjoyment from music, colours and smells."

"Unique insights/perspective."

"Non-judgmental."

"Excellent in a crisis (able to put all emotion aside)."

"Strong sense of justice/morality."

So there it is.

Yes, we struggle, but these things help balance life out and make it bearable, especially our humour.

One of my groups posted this yesterday:

"Spectrum is an anagram of crumpets", which pleased me greatly, and I wrote underneath:

"I'm on the Autism Crumpets, pass the honey", which has three laugh reacts so far, and that also pleases me greatly.

Artwork

Barty's best day

By Nicky

There’s no such thing as too many teddies

By Gareth

Article

There’s no such thing as too many teddies. There really isn’t.

A surfeit of squishies? Pah! Not enough!

A preponderance of plushies?! Never!

If anyone tells you your creatures are too copious, tell them:

There’s no such thing as too many teddies!

There really isn’t.

Teddies give me joy; stuffed animals are joyful; plushies are joyous; collecting cute bears and creatures is, erm, *joyifying* (I’m going to claim that word!). Encountering a soft toy in the wild (where ‘wild’, here, usually means a charity shop) is the occasion for such stim-blissy joy that I cannot help being filled with, well, en-*joy*-ment!

I’m an old-ish man. This old-ish man spent most of his early life telling himself that grown men (as I apparently am) need to resist their desire to collect things. Either resist the urge or, at a push, collect objects and curios that are ‘age appropriate’ (that crushing, normalising, homogenising term implying that we are all the same).

“Gareth, Gareth”, I would monologue and mumble to my younger self, “you just can’t keep buying silly looking creatures. Where will they go? What’s the point? People will think you are weird!” Alas, in my mid-to-late twenties, I allowed this censoring critic to constrain my inclination and I restricted myself – with great difficulty – to buying only a few, choicest teddies, collecting only two or three a year.

Oh! How many teddies escaped my grasp; how many did I have to glance, then leave slumped with joyous possibility on their shop shelves! When I did allow myself a teddy treat or a plushie present, I was vaguely embarrassed buying them. I would invent a tall-teddy-tale for the retailer: “I’m buying it for my niece,” “my friend has just had a baby,” “the kid next door might like it!” These were my white lies to mask my shyly sly soft toy indulgence.

One of the joyous benefits of my autism diagnosis at the age of 40, was an acceptance, then indulgence, then revelry in my visible role as a Teddy Collector! I am a middle-aged man and I collect teddy bears. There is no contradiction in that statement, and I am proud of it.

With contentment and joy, I now give over to impulse and the inevitability of picking up my latest teddy find!

I’d like to finish this piece with an image of a teddy bear that I made. His name is Monsieur Mignon (Mr Cute, in French). My friend recently knitted him a winter scarf, monogrammed with his initial.

So, just to reiterate for all those readers out there and for all those friends, families and allies who support us to pursue our joy, my motto, credo and autie-rallying call is:

There’s no such thing as too many teddies!

The handmade (by me) oak mantelpiece over my fire with a collection of special teddies.

‘Clark Gable’ (so named because of his pencil moustache). One of the finest and wonkiest teddies I own.

‘Monsieur Mignon’, my handmade teddy, sitting next to me as I write. Sooty, Sweep and Soo are in the background!

Led Zeppelin

By Michael

Abstract woodland

By Clive

Mighty peculiar

By Tom

When I was younger, elders used to say: “When you grow up and have children of your own…” or “When you get married…”, but I knew I didn’t want either of those things. I never envisaged a life that included living with another person or having children of my own; I couldn’t think of anything more disruptive or invasive.

From a very young age, I knew I was different. I didn’t enjoy birthday parties, I hated sports and always found other children ‘immature’. I was an adult trapped in a child’s body and much preferred spending time with my grandad tinkering around fixing things, which has put me in good stead to make do and mend! Teachers, family members, the mothers of other children would say things like “Isn’t he quiet”, “He’s so shy”, “Is there something wrong with him?” to name a few. It was humiliating and embarrassing because even then, you ask yourself, “Why am I this way?”

My mum would use the phrase ‘mighty peculiar’, and it took me a while to work out what she meant by it. The older generation can have fixed ideas about certain disabilities or how a typical boy should present himself, often based on outdated stereotypes and ignorance.

Secondary school was absolutely horrendous. It was noisy, boisterous and disruptive, and your success was based on how popular you were. Of course, not liking sports and speaking differently made me the target of bullying, even from certain teachers. I recall a particular teacher saying to me: “The problem with you Tom is that you’re just not popular with the other kids.” And the same teacher, who was also the careers adviser, told me: “The only job you would be fit for is a bin man” or refuse collector as we now call them. Everyone at that school made sure I knew that my face, my voice, my look, my everything did not belong there.

When I was 19, I went to my GP and told her I just didn’t feel right but didn’t know why. She said: “You’re depressed and anxious.” She gave me some pills, and I never questioned any of it. Doctors know best, don’t they? The years went by, on and off various antidepressants, CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) that never worked, always feeling exhausted and struggling more than most with everyday life that seemed so easy for everyone else.

I attended a learning seminar at work that was designed to help us support neurodiverse clients. They talked about misophonia, and immediately, I had a light bulb moment. I had what I now know to be a complete meltdown when, at 30,000 feet, a fellow passenger started snoring behind me. I had no filter, I was enraged, my ears piercing and my brain on fire. It was torture. I knew this wasn’t ‘normal’ behaviour, I needed help.

I started exploring more about misophonia and its links to autism. The more I read, the more I could relate. I visited my [new] GP, who agreed I was very likely misdiagnosed as depressed and referred me for an autism assessment.

Fast forward to summer 2025, I have my autism assessment, and hey presto, I’m diagnosed autistic, and I have to say, I am relieved to know who I am and why. For anyone to receive a late diagnosis (for me at the age of 44), it’s a lot to get your head around and, as they say, a process of discovery that will continue for some time. You ask yourself whether your life, decisions, opportunities or educational experiences would have been different had I been diagnosed early, but I guess then, especially during the 1980s and 90s, there wasn't the knowledge we have today, and so many were missed.

I wish to thank the National Autistic Society for all they do in raising awareness, challenging stereotypes and giving us a voice, as well as the brilliant resources available that have been so helpful in my journey. There is still a long way to go.

I make particular reference to three brilliantly-produced videos: *Diverted, Could you stand the rejection?* and *Can you make it to the end?* Sometimes I struggle explaining exactly how I feel in some of the situations depicted, but these capture my, and probably many others', reality by demonstrating what we are often going through on the inside while expertly masking. The videos give you the voice you sometimes cannot find when friends and family don't understand your reality.

I thought coming out as gay in my twenties would be difficult. In comparison, coming out as autistic has been a whole lot worse, and it has opened my eyes to the prejudice I and many others face in society, but that's a whole other article.

Mighty peculiar and proud.

Poem

Joy

By L

Joy, oh what a fickle thing
I see its tail when I sing
Always slipping from my grasp
Before I know the moment's passed.

Writing beckoned it to me
I pondered "Will you stay for tea?"
But it seemed so elusive, shy
Crept out the door with no goodbye.

I catch it in the setting sun
I breathe it in, it fills my lungs
In hues of pastel peach and violet
Until its absence leaves me quiet.

I hear it in the song of birds
And things most dismiss as absurd
The way that leaves and blossoms fall
In wild creatures great and small.

I see it in the deer at dusk
I gaze at stars, I'm at the cusp
Of feeling it flow all through me
But in the end it always leaves.

I came to learn it never lasts
Sooner or later it will pass
But still I'll always catch a glimpse
Grateful for each small instance.

Seeing the world differently

By Matt

As a 50-year-old man who's spent most of his life trying to make sense of the world, it's clear to me that the world doesn't always want to make sense back. This is not a new sensation. When I was growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I knew I felt out of step, like I was somehow missing a beat. But autism wasn't something people discussed much back then.

Only later did I understand just how much my brain was working overtime to make sense of what others seemed to grasp naturally. It's not that I don't notice things; I probably notice too much. A flickering light, a change in tone, the quiet tension in a room; they all arrive at once. But my mind going into hyperdrive to interpret the world is overwhelming. And overwhelming quickly becomes exhausting.

I try to remain philosophical about these things. Perhaps that's why I've always been drawn to the question of how the brain builds its own version of reality, something philosophers like Martin Heidegger and neuroscientists like Daniel Yon have long wrestled with. Autism is certainly central to how I construct my version of the world. But sometimes it keeps me from seeing what may be obvious to everyone else.

Learning the hard way

One moment from Sixth Form still makes me half-smile. I hadn't been turning up for English lessons. Instead, I decided to study alone, writing my essays in the quiet of my room. One Friday, it was time to hand in my papers, so I strode straight into what I thought was an empty classroom.

It wasn't empty. A Theatre Studies lesson was in full swing, something I somehow failed to notice. Without hesitation, I announced, "I'm submitting my essays!" and placed them on the teacher's desk. The students in the room burst into laughter, half-amused, half-astonished by my timing. In the moment, I couldn't see what was so funny.

Only later did it occur to me that I had gate-crashed an ongoing performance. The scene could have come straight from *Fawlty Towers* or a Ricky Gervais sketch; the kind of absurd comedy that only makes sense once you realise that, in fact, it's you who's the punchline. David Brent, eat your heart out.

Empathy, nature and music

People sometimes assume that autistic people lack empathy. I've never recognised myself that way. If anything, I feel too much, just not always in the ways others expect. Spoken words may fail me, but feelings don't. I find them in the quiet company of the natural world, in the sound of birdsong, or the changing light on my allotment. These things calm me, making sense even when human interaction might not.

Music has a similar effect - classical and electronic music in particular, where emotion can exist without words. When I listen to Beethoven, something in me unwinds. The way themes repeat reminds me of how my thoughts loop and layer.

Empathy for me is less about reading faces and more about sensing the pulse of life around me. It's not always easy to express, but it's there, and it runs deep.

Technology and connection

When I was younger, connection meant being with people; in pubs, at parties, walking through the park after closing time. You saw faces, heard laughter, struggled socially a little perhaps, but you were there, in the midst of it.

Now, so much of life happens through a screen. I work with younger adults in their twenties, and their social worlds seem to unfold almost entirely online: messages, swipes, endless notifications. They hang out at home scrolling on Tinder, Facebook, Snapchat, Messenger, whatever platform it may be. They appear comfortable with it – but to me it feels strangely weightless, not fully real.

The irony isn't lost on me. You might think someone on the spectrum would welcome less face-to-face interaction, but I worry about what's being lost. We're fundamentally social animals, despite our awkwardness. Without real presence, something essential gets missed. As the algorithms bombard us with the content we want to see and views we want to hear, I fear that we are in danger of losing sight of what it truly means to be human.

Perhaps that's why I retreat to simpler things: a walk, a book, a garden. Technology can entertain us in the moment, but the natural world still speaks the clearer language.

Beauty and absurdity

Nearly 30 years have passed since I moved to the cathedral city I still call home. With time, I've learned that the world's contradictions never really go away – rather, they become easier to live with. The same mind that once misread more social cues than I care to admit can now laugh at them. The same sensitivity that once felt like a burden now lets me see beauty in small, ordinary things.

I may still struggle to find the right words, as though spoken language was built for another type of brain. But I've made peace with that. The challenge of expression has pushed me toward other kinds of understanding: listening, observing, noticing what others miss. Maybe that's its own form of communication.

"It's just a ride," as the late, great comedian Bill Hicks once said of life. Existence still feels that way to me, bewildering and occasionally profound. No psychedelics required for me, though. The world is already trippy enough. Autism hasn't made that harder to see; if anything, it's made the view more vivid.

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Next issue's theme:

The suggested theme for the April 2026 edition is: Routines.

You are invited to interpret this any way you like and respond to it in writing or with visual art. You may want to share something about your routines, why they matter to you, whether you've changed your routines over time or how you cope with changes to routine.

We also welcome submissions on any other topic of your choosing, unrelated to the suggested theme. Remember to complete a permissions form for your submission, as we can't publish anything without it. Please submit work at autism.org.uk/the-spectrum.

Article

Preserving joy in the autistic mind

By Melanie Louise

Autism can occasionally have a bad reputation in the media; it seems to focus on meltdowns and shutdowns. No one focuses on the autistic joy. Chris Packham briefly mentioned it in his BBC documentary: *Inside our autistic minds*. He mentions autism is a processing difference, where we feel sensory issues a little more than neurotypical people. This is true, and with this article, I would like to focus on sensory joy and how wonderful it is to be able to feel and hear what other people can't. For instance, the smell after it rains and the comfort that fluffy socks bring. The comfort of your favourite movie you've watched a thousand times, just to have the feeling of something consistent in a harsh and busy world.

You wouldn't be able to tell if I'm having a meltdown or shutdown – the consequences generally follow when I'm in the quietness of my bedroom. When I'm decompressing, every sensory issue I have suffered throughout the day comes tumbling over me like a ton of bricks. It may take a few hours or a few days to recover. I find solace in my quiet, darkened bedroom with my fluffy socks and a new set of PJs. Then, when I am feeling lighter, I will focus on new sensory joy to compensate. Usually with something fluffy, or my favourite silver tinsel, a small toy and the quietness of reading a good book. For me, reading is a gateway to fantasy worlds, new stories and new characters to focus on, and it helps me escape my overthinking mind from the hustle and bustle of a busy day. Eventually, with reading, my mind quietens, my eyes get tired and I fall asleep feeling a little lighter with some preserved joy left over.

I do have sensory issues with lights, sounds and smell. I hate balloons, fireworks and party poppers. Perfume is an assault on my senses, and I can smell it a mile off. If it's one that really doesn't agree with me, it can make me physically sick. I can smell the meat section in supermarkets before I have even gone in. It is safe to say that the autistic mind generally has a lot going on, and we need to be kinder to ourselves in finding sensory joy wherever we can.

Christmas time has just passed, and we are now well into the new year. There's a lot sensory-wise to process at Christmas, such as flashing lights, unwelcome hugs, loud senseless chatter and the clinking of glasses to hold a toast. People pulling crackers or popping that party popper in celebration. I preserve the joy wherever I can, especially when I get home, where I don't have Christmas decorations, and this just gives me time to decompress from all the flashing lights. I have, however, always enjoyed the feel of white or silver tinsel and focus my energies on that when Christmas comes and everyone puts up their decorations. For me, preserving the joy is a state of mind, and I try and find it wherever I can. I need to hold on to that state of mind; otherwise, I'd crack under pressure. People don't understand when they find out I don't do Christmas decorations. It's not because I'm stingy or can't be bothered. I just need one place in the world where everything is a little less busy: a time for my body to recalibrate, a time for my mind to decompress from all the over-exposure to flashing lights while I am out and about.

If you're an autistic person who struggles around Christmas, I'd suggest having fewer decorations, soft and warmer lights, lights that don't flash and no unnecessary smells such as diffusers, candles and plug-ins. Just having a little less in the home might be the fortress of solitude you need.

Because the autistic mind is so busy, I focus a lot on preserving the joy. At one point, my ultimate peace was riding horses, but due to late diagnoses of chronic illness type 1 diabetes and a horrendous accident in 2021 - it has prevented me from riding activities. However, my favourite thing has always been to groom horses, feed them and generally look after them. I like to volunteer to do this, in the warmer months, at a local riding school. I think a lot of autistic people have an affinity with horses. They're peaceful, majestic creatures that can make us feel better without having the need to talk, without having the need to mask. I can be myself with horses, and that is the ultimate way for me to preserve joy.

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