

Produced by and for autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **118** April 2024



National
Autistic
Society

The Spectrum

The Spectrum is run by and for autistic adults (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-16s). 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.

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 email address for a subscription form. All contact details are below. Organisations requiring multiple copies: please get in touch.

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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.

The purpose of the magazine was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at. The magazine has also provided work experience for those who have held the position of Editor and Sub-editor. These are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce and the Goth.

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 a group of original readers.

This was suggested by **Anna Kaczynski**.

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

Please send all correspondence and subscription requests to:

Web: www.autism.org.uk/theSpectrum

and follow the link to the submissions form.

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Please note that 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.

Welcome to the delayed April edition.

We are sorry for the delay to the magazine this year. We are hoping to have the next issue (July's) with you in late August.

We hope you enjoy the great variety of articles, poetry and artwork. This issue doesn't have a theme but is a selection of submissions on a range of topics. Our suggested theme for the July issue is on page 17.

We also want to let you know two issues in advance that the October issue will have a few design changes to it. We want to bring it in line with the current National Autistic Society branding.

Yours,

Fiona and Charlotte

the Editors

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Cats

by Grace

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Have you ever tried to connect with new people by giving them a one-hour talk on all the different cat breeds in the world? Thought not. And if you never tried this conversation starter with any of the ‘cool’ kids at secondary school... then you’re already doing better than me.

As a child, I always had a soft spot for cats, and animals in general. My love of cats turned into an autistic passion thanks to a library book all about different breeds. Shortly after borrowing it from the library, I was ill and off school for a day or two. To pass the time as I was on the mend, I started browsing through this book in bed, with its detailed illustrations of different cats, and was hooked. My knowledge went from vague awareness of what a Siamese looks like, to being able to differentiate between the Bengal and the Egyptian Mau, tell the origin story of the Burmilla, name the biggest and smallest breeds, and much more. And I wanted to talk about it... all the time.

This basically summarises intense autistic interests. Many autistic people barely glance at things we are expected to be interested in, yet will be absolutely fascinated by things that most people don’t even think about. We research our passions and love to talk about them because they are important to us. So, I thought I’d reflect on the little things that outline what my intense interest means for me:

My school project in Year 5 that not only comprised a handwritten page for every cat breed I knew about, complete with drawings, but also a set of carefully hand-made clay models.

My childhood variant of 20 Questions: Guess the Cat Breed. When I would spend ages sketching pictures of cats I’d found in my various

cat books for the sheer joy of it.

When we had to create our own trophies in Design Technology at secondary school, and mine was for Best Cat Owner.

The satisfaction I’d get during my Animal Management college course from using Punnett squares to calculate the likelihood of cats being born with certain genetic traits.

The strong feeling of injustice I’ve always had whenever people actively dislike cats – to me, it seems like prejudice, something I feel very strongly about in any form. Did I mention that there is a large overlap between negative cat stereotypes – cold, unfeeling, disloyal – and autism stereotypes?

The strong feeling of injustice I’ve always had whenever people dislike specific cat breeds or colours. All cats need love and care regardless of what they look like, and it feels wrong to judge them for their appearance.

Having to suppress my autistic need for accuracy when people confuse cat breeds with colour varieties. When most people list types of cat, they usually categorise common breeds, like Persian, Siamese or Maine Coon, with colour varieties, like black and white, tabby and tortoiseshell. A bit like having a list of countries that includes Japan, London, Wales, Africa and Egypt.

The pride I take in being able to explain why tortoiseshell cats are almost always female.

How easily I connect with cats because, like me, they don’t like loud noise, sudden touch or too much eye contact.

an article and illustration

How I can still remember the names and breeds of each cat I met at a cat café with Katy in February 2022 but I still can't reliably name or recognise my neighbours.

When I was a child with minimal social awareness, I loved talking about any interest of mine in detail. Then as a teenager, I became

painfully self-conscious and tried to mask anything that made me seem different. Now as an adult, I am learning the balance between not sharing more about a subject than people want to know, and not being ashamed of having unusual interests. Because if everyone only talked about widely accepted topics, nobody would learn anything new, right?



Fred

by **Grace**

© Grace 2024

West London

by Michael L

© Michael 2024



The Summer House

by Clive

© Clive 2024



two paintings

Seascape and landscape

by **Charlotte**

© Charlotte 2024



Not another therapy session

by Traci

© Traci 2024

computer screen is black and white
skin skypes my DNA, detects the differences
female psychologist has a white pigment
other coding is me, our conversation involves
the adult report I read, little understanding
psychologist provides results in details
nerves are on overdrive, await to hear
her remarks, she helps to name my habits
explains each section of the tests I took
reveals this rippling rose's mindset, life
latches to my languages, hope plays
harmonious head songs.
not another therapy session

personal stories of a beginning, middle
no end yet, shower the psychologist
gets a thorough rinse in, fuller identity
consistent characteristics to care for
rose is a ruby when it blossoms, moving
past the masquerade, normal is a nope
in my application, ordinary organism
opening the omnipotent, mind has a
simple base, bippity boppity behavior
black, autistic, adhd woman, adult kid
not another therapy session
Search to find answers.
Wisdom is a window.
Seek the source.

When I wash up I see rainbows

by Lavender Girl

© Lavender Girl 2024

When I wash up I see Rainbows
Dancing in the kitchen across the sink.
Reflecting in the light,
It makes me stop and think.
Thank you Mum for the prism.
It hangs in my window
And gives me Rainbows.
Red, yellow, green and blue-
The full spectrum.

Home

by AB

© AB 2024

Home is where I want to be
Because it means so much to me

It's the place where I meet my friends
Where I know that love never ends

My family is there, too
And there is so much to do
I really enjoy my life at home
In the area where I can roam

In the fields and near the trees and in the sun
Being there is always fun

My home is my castle I can say
And I absolutely mean it all the way!

Working behind my autistic mask

by CC

© CC 2024

For me, an autistic young person, I would find it difficult holding down full-time employment. Some of the barriers I would face would probably not cross the mind of someone neurotypical. I would struggle with relationships and boundaries. People that you get on with at work may want to know you or be in your personal life so everything would blur into one. I may need things to soothe me that others don't like or find odd and it would make me feel isolated and a failure. This hurts because I am a people pleaser and want to make people happy.

Life can sometimes feel like I'm in a game, having to hide who I really am, feeling as if I'm invisible, my real self that is. I try so hard but what if I come across as rude to the people I work with? And no one ever gets my humour. It's draining trying to work out and pull from a conversation, even knowing when to speak takes effort. It's tiring now, imagine masking all day at work and feeling like you are constantly being watched and criticising yourself for every action. I would feel paranoid as if I was doing something wrong.

Masking is like breathing, you don't even know you're doing it sometimes but then exhaustion hits. I often do not know how I feel. My mind can be very manic. I can be laughing one minute then crying the next. I often talk to myself at home as only I understand. It's challenging feeling like you're alone and no one gets it but what would happen if I talked to myself at work? The real me doesn't show up a lot of the time and I keep it down until I feel like lashing out, like a kettle getting hotter and hotter. People would not get this when I've seemed like I've been coping the whole time.

I would love to educate others and help

other versions of me out there because we are in 2024 now. I find it difficult knowing that females fall through the gap and do not get an autism diagnosis until later in life. We need to figure it out and help them sooner. I want to help people by sharing my experiences. I wasn't shy growing up, I was confident but this was a mask and awareness needs to be brought to the different masks that females may hide behind. From personal experience, I know the pressures of masking and the toll it can have on your mental health. Being emotional doesn't always mean you have a mental illness such as depression or borderline personality disorder. The stereotypes need to be broken and more understanding in workplaces would help autistic employees thrive. I can mask my way through life and no one will notice but why should I have to and pay the price when I am alone? I don't want to feel like I am a burden when I ask for help.

Growing up, I was a people pleaser. I acted like a perfect student so my teachers wouldn't hate me. It's tough, it really is, having to hide who you really are on a daily basis. Some autistic people including myself are so good at masking it's just like 'copy and paste' on a computer. If we get a job, we need to trust that our employer will look after us but so many workplaces are not autism aware. It's like balancing a tennis ball on a football for some, so difficult to hold.

There are different keys to unlock different doors. We are unique and an autistic perspective could be very beneficial to a workplace. If you use the wrong key, don't break the door, figure out how else you can open it. If an employer works with their autistic employee to find out what supports them to remain comfortable, whether that's allowing music at a desk or fidget toys in meetings, it could overcome a barrier and build

an article continued and a photo

trust. You should not have to be forced to mask or try to be like everyone else. I communicate through writing and only use my voice with a select number of people but I have found my passion with rapping and I would love to help

others through my writing. Maybe if you find your passion, the job will find you. We can do it, we just need a little help. Know how strong you are! I have got your back!

Girl alone

by **Stephen**

© Stephen 2024



Elton John

by Michael B

© Michael B



Two halves

by **Alison**

© Alison 2024

Solid and green
Split in two halves
No window to view through
My paintwork is flaking
A touch up is needed.

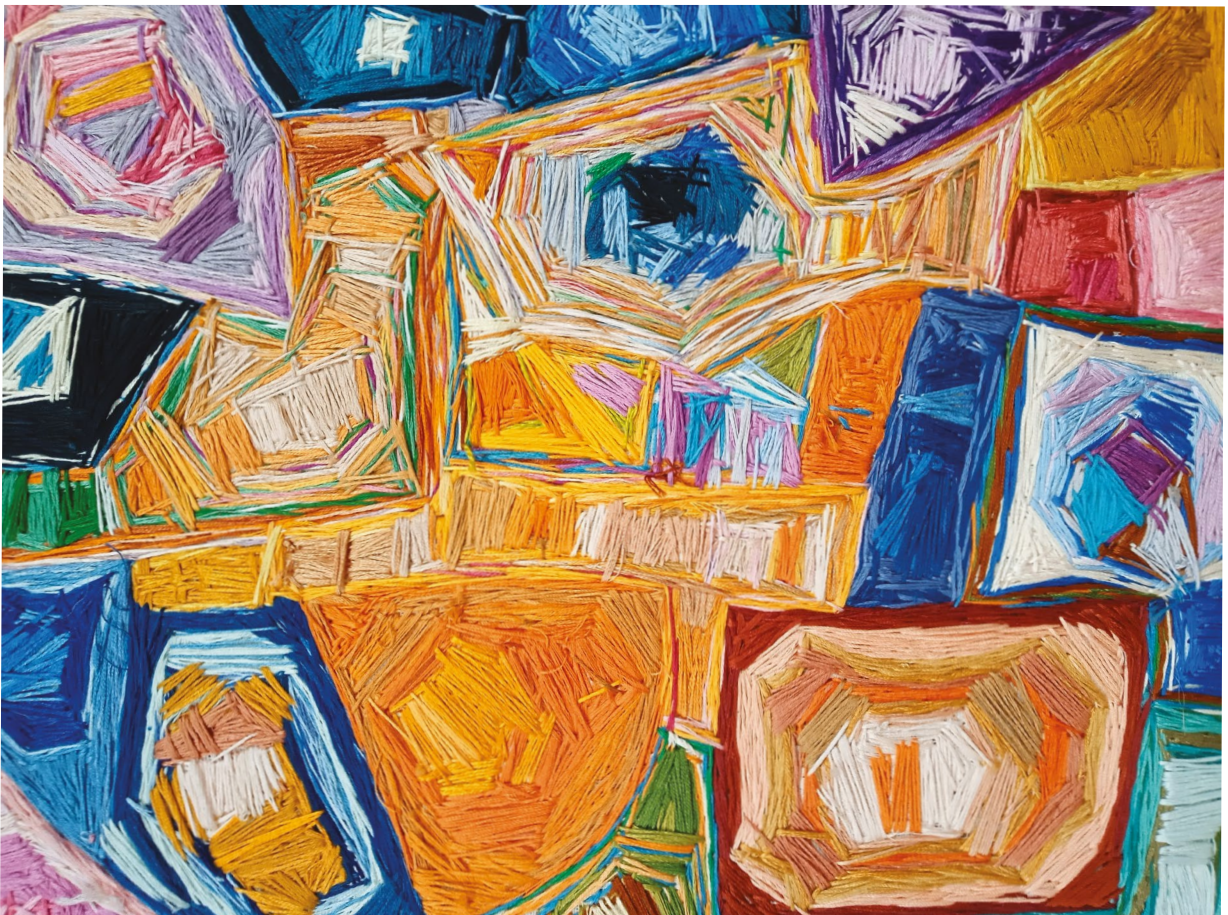
If I had a window
Would I be more appealing?
Allowing in light,
the sun or the moon
Shadows stretching along the wooden floor
beyond.

But I am closed, solid, shut
Rarely do I open
When someone does knock
Or ring the bell
I tentatively open up
And I'm blinded by the light.

Cross stitch

by **Kathy**

© Kathy 2024



Abstract cross stitch

by Julia

© Julia 2024



Mask

by **Bella**

© Bella 2024

Before school
I would pack my bag
Place a mask in it
And zip it up tight
And when I felt something
Some trickle of colour
Some sliver of melody
I would reach in with trembling hands
Placing it over my face
Trying my best to play the part
As the curtain lurches away from me
The awaiting audience is illuminated
By the glow of the singular, burning spotlight
Trapping me in its radiance
Demanding everything and nothing
But none of them wear masks
It is only me who must
To cover the cracks
To cover the shadows
I play the parts for them
Thriving by the harsh sound of their laughter
Seamlessly moving from character to character

Bringing a mirror image to life
Like one of them
But
Suddenly
The mask slips
a corner uncovered
The audience looks confused
This isn't supposed to be happening
Then the spotlight
Curdles to crimson
and hands
so many
hands
reaching towards me
trying to caress, to piece me back together
to peel the mask off of my face completely
and then I run from the stage
the light
the hands
the shame
and the curtain falls.

Shelter from the storm - on mental illness and autism

by Joy

© Joy 2024

Content warning: this article talks about mental illness and suicide. If you have been affected by any of the content in this article or the magazine, you can visit the National Autistic Society's urgent help page: www.autism.org.uk/contact-us/urgent-help

I write to you today from the comfort of the sort of blue, easily wipeable chairs that you only find in hospital (or hospital-adjacent) settings. I am in what they call a place of safety. It is a building where mental health nurses watch you, bring cups of tea and morsels of hospital food, occasionally take you into a different room for 'a little chat', and then, when you are deemed safe enough, you leave. I am grateful for the care although somewhat begrudge the fact that I need it. I keep trying to remind myself that there is nothing shameful about being dependent on others. We are all alive due to the chance collision of people that cared - nurses, porters, friends, midwives, parents, doctors, the list goes on. I am a medical student, so see evidence that humanity gets stronger the more we care for each other daily. I might need looking after for the moment and, yes, my brain is screaming at me that I don't deserve the care but my thoughts are just a background hum; they have no power if I don't listen (or so the nurses tell me).

But why am I here? Well, in the immediate sense, I am here because this morning my housemate found me distressed, in crisis, and about to do something dangerous. We made a mutual decision that I wouldn't be safe at home and so we called around. She had to drive me to a location an hour away (something else that I am immensely grateful for) because lots of other people needed a place of safety in my area today, and, frankly, they got there first. Staffing may have also played a role, but I am no expert on how the

NHS is staffed. If you are asking that question in the longer-term sense, I guess I am here because I am a mentally unwell, late-diagnosed autistic woman and, in my case at least, this has caused a vulnerability to incredibly bleak mental states.

When I look back on how my mental illness developed, once again I am met with a chance collision but not a chance collision of care. I am first met with a little girl who couldn't stand the noise of the hand dryers in public toilets, the noises of the arcade, or the feeling of facial hair rubbing against her cheek when her family tried to show affection. She followed rules to the letter and got anxious when they were broken. She was loved but, at the same time, was told every day in a covert way that she was too much, too sensitive, and too weird to accommodate. As she got older, it continued and spread into school where the only place she felt worthy was when she was getting good marks in exams because they were proof that maybe, just maybe, she might have something to offer the world. On the way, she learnt the art of masking because, when she masked, even though people still didn't like her very much, they didn't actively bully her. Yet, underneath the confident, nerdy exterior, she was profoundly lonely. Over time, the daily, niggling pain of not fitting in got harder to conceal until she moved to university and the mask broke. Regrettably, by this point, the mask was so firmly glued to her body that it smashed her into pieces too. Tiny, sharp, suicidal pieces.

an article continued and next issue's theme

I would like to make it clear that no individual person or situation is to blame for my development of mental illness. Humans tend to overestimate the contributions of individuals and underestimate societal factors. I had a loving family and teachers who did their best to care for me but, through no fault of their own, they could not recognise me as autistic. The kids that bullied me and ostracised me were just that: kids. They were all under the thumb of a society that viewed the autistic child as white, male, train-obsessed, and minimally masking. This is, however, at least beginning to change. We see evidence of this in the media with shows like *Heartbreak High*, *a Kind of Spark*, and even the new advert for the stain remover Vanish depicting an autistic experience that looks at least somewhat like mine. We see evidence for this in research with a shifting focus towards environmental factors and away from attempting to change the autistic person. We see more and more autistic people

being given a platform to share their experiences. Put simply, the groundwork is being laid for spaces where we autistic people don't need to chip away at ourselves to fit in but, instead, can inhabit our whole, true, beautiful selves.

This morning I could not see any of that hope and, truthfully, I am still finding it hard to grip tightly enough to stop myself from collapsing back down into that dense black hole that nearly engulfed me. I do know this though: in a couple of hours my friend will pick me up in her car and I will be alive because of a culture of caring. If I can add something back to that culture, be a shelter from the storm, maybe that's something I can hold onto.

The suggested theme for the July 2024 edition is: **Diagnosis**. You are invited to interpret this any way you like and respond to it in writing or with visual art. You could think about your reasons for wanting or not wanting a diagnosis, your experience of the referral and assessment process, your reaction to getting your results, and what impact having or not having a diagnosis has had.

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 here:
www.autism.org.uk/the-spectrum/submit-work

a painting

Flowers

by Charlotte

© Charlotte 2024



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 an alias. 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.
- 5) When you send in a piece for publication in *the Spectrum*, you need to complete a permissions form. The online permissions form is at

www.autism.org.uk/spmagpermissions
- 6) The National Autistic Society promotes *the Spectrum* on social media using pieces taken from the magazine.
- 7) The National Autistic Society would like to keep in touch with you about National Autistic Society services, support, events, campaigns and fundraising. If you want to hear from the National Autistic Society, you can opt in to this on the National Autistic Society website. The National Autistic Society will only contact you in the ways you want.
- 8) If you subscribe to the paper edition and move house, please inform *the Spectrum* and include your old address as well as your new address. Even if you've paid for the Royal Mail forwarding service (or another forwarding service), you still need to inform *the Spectrum* that you have moved address.
- 9) You do not have to be a member of the National Autistic Society to subscribe to *the Spectrum*.
- 10) If you want to unsubscribe from the paper version, inform *the Spectrum* and include your postal address.
- 11) If you want to resubscribe (or subscribe for the first time) inform *the Spectrum* and include your postal address and fee (for the paper version).
- 12) 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.



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