

Produced by and for people who have autism-spectrum conditions

Asperger *United*

Edition 74 April 2013



Asperger United

Asperger United is a magazine run by and for adults with autism-spectrum conditions (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-sixteens). The magazine aims to put people who have the condition in touch with each other and to share information so that they can lead more independent lives.

Please note that *AU* receives over 200 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. *AU* protects the identity of contributors by not printing full names unless the writer asks for his or her full name to be used.

Asperger United is free. To subscribe you to the paper edition, we need your postal address. We ask for a contribution of £6 per year from overseas readers and £10 from professionals and institutions to cover postage costs. Please make cheques payable to the NAS. Organisations requiring multiple copies: no extra fee, please get in touch.

Editor the Goth

Telephone and production support

The National Autistic Society's Publications Department

Asperger United was founded 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, formerly Cohen.

Please send all correspondence and subscription requests to:

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Thank you to Graeme Lawson for producing the *AU* logo.

Please note that the views expressed in *Asperger United* are not necessarily those of the editor, the National Autistic Society or those involved in the publication of the magazine.

Asperger United 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 postal or email addresses above.

Contributions for the next issue should reach *AU* by **13 May 2013**

Welcome to the April edition of *Asperger United*.

Almost all of the contributions about pleasure and insomnia that were sent in during the last quarter appear in this issue, but it still ended up being the work edition, as contributions about work massively outnumbered all the others.

Work is clearly something that readers of *AU* find daunting and scary, especially looking for work, interviews, and interacting with managers and colleagues: please write or email in your feelings about this.

Charlotte, who has a letter on page 6, also asked whether an *Asperger United* forum could be set up on the NAS Online Community. I

am unable to run an *AU* forum — lack of time and money — but anyone can start a discussion about *Asperger United* and *AU* topics, themes and contributions in the discussion forum on the Online Community. (Charlotte's paragraph about the forum had to be deleted in order to fit her letter on the page — this is a typical difficulty I have and one of the main reasons for editing letters and articles.)

If someone starts an *AU* discussion, I shall try to make time to read it — please let me know if you do. I can't promise to contribute to any discussion, but if you feel something is important you can email a report of the discussion to me for possible publication in the magazine,

the Editor

the work edition — the next issue notice is on page 11

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Work

by David

At the age of 28 I have recently been diagnosed with Asperger's, and have taken the daunting step of explaining the situation to my employers.

A lot of my colleagues were skeptical. We work in a call centre, raising money for charity — our performance could be said to be an indirect, but reasonably accurate, measure of empathy. But I do have problems on the telephone — my responses are stilted, disjointed: always polite, but not necessarily strictly appropriate. My supervisors have commented on this, but in the past the response has always been to respond with face-to-face coaching.

I hate this. It's not that I don't like my supervisors — I do — but I find the situation impossible to read. Their body-language becomes dominating and conflicts with the "I'm just trying to help you do better" tones of their voices. Their advice is hard to evaluate because, expressed as a series of statements the imperative nature of each of which is assumed to be equally valid; incongruence is inevitable. For me, the most significant feature of such chats is the length, from which (in inverse relationship) may be gauged the urgency, which is a paradox. From my perspective, the whole process is analogous to Copernicus' efforts to prove that the Sun went around the Earth by constructing ever-more mathematically elaborate ellipses, before coming to the conclusion that, until the mind of God were better understood, it would be practical to assume (for purposes of calculation only) that the Earth did, in fact, go around the Sun. Using this comparison, I can reconcile myself to the fact that apparent incongruity and contradiction are features of dialogue that more-or-less disappear when the relative weighting of sentiment indicated by correct interpretation of body-language is applied. I want to stress, however, that I'm not a cynic — it's just people doing their best to help me are making me more confused.

Difficulties at work have not just been confined to the call-centre floor. I find negotiating the corridors intimidating — I hate bumping into people, and I flinch at back-pats and handshakes. It's not that I don't like the people I work with, it's just that I am the only person there, or indeed whom I have ever met, that can get a handshake wrong. Worse is hugging. I like to hug people I feel I know, but getting to know people by hugging them is problematic. How much pressure is too much? If I apply too little pressure I may be hugged back harder, resulting in difficulties extricating myself from the embrace. How long is a hug supposed to last? — I fear the length of time may be very precise. I've noticed that guys pat each other on the back to signal the end of this form of social interaction — does one pat a lady? Writing about it now, it feels as if I should be able to work out what to do from the context, but I often end up feeling I've come across as unfriendly. The people at work are occasional huggers, and I feel it's important to reciprocate. Although I don't like to initiate it, I feel I should accept that, while I may not enjoy it, others need this sort of thing and it simultaneously expresses some sort of heartfelt social platitude. On the nature of heartfelt platitudes, as I imagine Wittgenstein felt about Fight Club, I must remain silent.

At this stage I feel obliged to interject with a rhetorical question: given that I have had similar difficulties all my life, why have I only asked for a diagnosis and thus help at work recently? Well, I have been desperate to ignore my difficulties in the hope they would go away. Only lately, as I approach 30 and find that planning my meals, let alone my career, overwhelms me; as I slowly notice (and it takes me a long time to notice) that talking to fifty people individually a day is disorientating and makes me listless and confused; as I examine my love-life in the time it takes to read an envelope and reflect that, as much as I would enjoy the company, I don't know if I could change my

routine — I have been led to the conclusion that I could do with a lifestyle that nurtures my talents, rather than depletes my resources.

I should mention, the other reason everyone at work was skeptical about my diagnosis, was because I perform as a stand-up comedian. Given the list of social things that make me uncomfortable, I view this as a personal victory, but I'm actually not the only Aspergic stand-up I know! A friend pointed out that talking at unreasonable length about your interests is something Aspies and comics have in common!

I started because I love to hear comedy — I'm fascinated by the logic of humour and irony — and it was a challenge because it was by far the hardest thing I could conceive of doing. I enjoy it, but it terrifies me. A (possibly counter-intuitive) way that I overcome the difficulties I face with social interaction is that the character I portray on stage is a girl. All the models of empathy I have been able to discern and copy are female, so I dress up as a girl, strut my stuff, and project the most convincing model of what I imagine is normality I can possibly muster. Of course I rely on the fact that the mask of my costume is performing the same role as that of a clown's, obscuring my discomfort with social interaction and parodying my poor interpretations of appropriate behaviour by creating a person who has even less clue than I have. The irony is funny — does my character know how awkward she is? Is the guy underneath conscious either? How much of this comedy routine is really true? — but my favourite part is that the humour is tempered with vulnerability: by laughing with me and enjoying the irony of the situation, I believe I am giving neurotypical people an insight into my Aspie mind, with its difficulties and triumphs.

So, in conclusion, I have come to a place of acceptance: I certainly wouldn't want to be anything other than an Aspie. By accepting I am an Aspie, I have taken the first step towards a way of being that I actively participate in, rather than observe tacitly. I need more choices. I want to be happy. Only now I have my diagnosis can I accept that the things I look for to find happiness are different to those of a neurotypical person.

The Asperkid's secret book of social rules

Jennifer Cook O'Toole

Jessica Kingsley Publishers

ISBN: 978 1 84905 915 2

£13.99 / \$19.95

review by the Goth

Originally begun as a list of the social rules the author had discovered, for this book Jennifer Cook O'Toole has expanded the explanations of the rules to make a fairly thick book, though it's broken up into many small chapters and sections, so it's a fairly easy read. It's aimed at children and teenagers, but if you haven't learnt hundreds of social rules there are going to be at least some here that you didn't know — it taught me some new ones, and improved my understanding of others. She is, though, American, so some of the rules don't apply very well to Britain, and, also, it's her opinion of what the rules should be for her particular American culture, so even other Americans might be misled by some suggestions. One that stood out for me is that she thinks chivalry is things done by men for women, but a chivalrous person will do things for anybody — to single out a woman for all your chivalrous acts is self-serving and condescending. It's still a lot better to be led into a few mistakes than to not have a clue about what to do! Useful.

This book is available from all good bookshops and through Amazon's charitable scheme at

www.autism.org.uk/amazon

and if you use this address instead of the usual Amazon one, the NAS gets a donation from Amazon.

Dear readers,

on many occasions I have had the urge to write for *Asperger United* but never got round to it; I also lacked confidence to do so and was worried about the reaction it would bring.

The first issue of 2013, though, particularly attracted me to reply to many of the articles and letters within it along with the possible subject of employment for the next issue.

First to the article by June Bowden and particularly the comment at the end by the Editor. I too feel I have theory of mind and empathy to some degree and find the idea of those with ASD not having it odd. In saying that, though, I do not know what it is like to be a person without ASD and how these characteristics are experienced by them to say if mine in any way differ to theirs.

In response to Thomas's letter I would like to say I am the complete opposite regarding those sounds that calm him. Sounds like hoovers, hairdryers and tumble dryers set me on edge and affect my levels of concentration, but I do like music, particularly if it is live.

Responding to Ann, I have experienced many who believe they understand ASD, though I am not sure if any of my difficulties have been ignored because of it. It is extremely difficult to gain guidance from those who have experience of those on the spectrum. I would say though that I have been on antidepressants since the age of 16 (now 32), had significant difficulty in getting off them and had many professionals unsure of a diagnosis for me or giving an incorrect diagnosis during this time. Gaining my diagnosis of AS was a fight. First, one doctor said I did not have it, then my GP thought the NHS would not fund my referral, so I went private. Following this I was unable to take up the therapy they advised due to funding not being agreed.

Leading into the issue of employment: like her paraphrase of Damian, I am also well-qualified and experienced but struggling to gain employment.

I have worked for over ten years with those with communication difficulties, gained multiple qualifications, most recently an MSc in speech and language therapy, and an enhanced Makaton certificate. I have a particular interest in alternative and augmentative communication and continue to develop skills as a speech and language therapist (SLT) in voluntary work with adults with learning disabilities, which I find extremely rewarding. I wish I could work with this client group, but have found, despite the extensive positive feedback from those I worked with, I fall down at interview, so those with less experience and qualifications are employed while I am losing confidence.

This leads me on to the letters by Mrs Anna Kaczynski and Eleni. So far I also feel neglected by the NAS whose graduate employment support scheme had a year's waiting list and would have meant regular trips up to London from East Sussex. All they could supply me with was a lengthy disclosure document to personalise for potential employers looking more at my weaknesses and needs than my strengths! Yet the last of these, my strengths, were significantly greater, and sought-after during my work placements.

As for local employment support services: they have no idea! No experiences of people on the spectrum who have professional qualifications. So I have to live with my parents as I can't afford to do otherwise. I only moved back after uni at the end of 2011 so I could save money to move to anywhere with a job.

Aside, Autscope continues to be a joy and learning experience that I hope to attend for what must be my sixth year.

On to Debbie's letter, where I identify firstly with her fearing what others will think of me; problems with low self-esteem (in my case outside work); finding it hard to take on board people's encouragement. I am, though, determined and just want to be working and have my own place again. I seek others' opinions, as I value their input.

Charlotte

Pen pals

Pen pal number 146

Hi, my name is Victoria. I am 23 years old. I was diagnosed with Asperger's at the age of 11. I am from Doncaster but currently live in Rotherham. My hobbies are fitness — I go to the gym twice a week and enjoy long walks. I enjoy shopping and picking out unusual and beautiful items, I also have a passion for cooking and enjoy trying new recipes. I have a keen interest in going to college although I am unsure what I would like to study. I am a very outgoing person and enjoy making new friends.

I hope to hear from someone soon!

Victoria

Pen pal number 147

I'm really nervous so here goes: my name is Brandon. I am 13 years old, nearly 14. I live in the West Midlands. I was diagnosed with autism when I was 6 years old and dyspraxia when I was 10 years old.

My interests are computers, swimming, trampolining, cinema, playing on my PS3 and I'm a big WWE fan.

I find it hard to make friends and would love to have a pen pal or email pals of a similar age and similar interests.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Brandon

How to place a pen-pal advert

- > All you need to do is send your advert along with your name and address (and email address if you want) to *Asperger United*. You can use the Royal Mail or email. The next pen-pal number will be given to your advert when it arrives.
- > Please note that *AU* does not print dating adverts, as it is unable to provide suitable support.
- > Those under the age of sixteen must have parental permission before placing a pen-pal advertisement in *Asperger United*.

How to reply to pen pals

- > Please remember to let us know the name and number of the person whom your letter is for. (All pen pals are numbered by the editor, not the person who sends in the advert.)
- > Please remember to put your address on your letter.
- > To contact a pen pal, please send your letter to *Asperger United*, c/o The National Autistic Society, 393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG, or email asp.utd@nas.org.uk
- > We will pass your letter on to the person you wish to contact. However, we cannot guarantee the person will reply as that is entirely their decision.
- > Please note that all pen-pal letters sent via *Asperger United* are opened before being passed on.

****Important notice — please read****

Asperger United is happy to publish pen-pal advertisements but we must stress that we are not a pen-pal or introduction organisation. We do not match people up and we cannot monitor letters (other than the first letter, that is sent via us) so please be cautious when releasing personal details in your letters. The National Autistic Society / *Asperger United* cannot intervene or be held responsible for any ensuing correspondence between letter-writers.

Pen pal number 148

Hello everybody,

my name is Ben and I am 17.

I was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome four years ago and I am writing to speak to other people.

I am interested in music, football, professional wrestling, going outside, a wide range of TV and video games, and I'm also a member of a local community group.

I live in Kent with my mum and sister and would like to get to know a few people.

I will read all your letters and hope to reply to most.

Pen pal number 149

Hi, I am a 32-year-old university student with Asperger's syndrome. I would like a pen pal of similar age, female and who lives in the North-West. My interests are movies, history, reading books and the theatre. I am also keen on Twilight and the Titanic. It would be lovely to hear from a like-minded female pen pal,

yours sincerely,

Susan

Pen pal number 150

My name is Jacob. I'm 28 years old, I like any music except opera! I like most movies, I like going to the mall, I like to cook/bake. I especially enjoy college football. I would write to anyone. I was diagnosed with Asperger's in 2010.

Twenty-six pen-pal adverts have been held over for publication in the next five issues, Editor.

Pen pal number 151

Hello, my name is Katie. I'm 24 and live in Derbyshire with my mum, sister, and brother. I have ASD and OCD. My main passion is Spanish and Latino culture. I've been belly dancing for two years, and taught myself Spanish for over nine years now. I also speak a little Portuguese. My favourite singers are Enrique Iglesias and Shakira. I am looking for more pen pals to discuss similar interests, and to write in Spanish to. Like this:

Hola, me llamo Katie. Tengo 24 años y vivo en Derbyshire con mi madre, mi hermana y mi hermano. Tengo Autismo Suspecto Desorden y Desorden Obsesivo Compulsivo. Mi pasión es la lengua española y cultura latina. Me he estado haciendo danza del vientre para dos años y enseña misma la lengua española de una periodo de nueve años ahora. Yo también hablo un poquito de portugués. Mis cantantes favoritos son Enrique Iglesias y Shakira. Estoy buscando para más correspondencias para discutir mis intereses distintas y a que yo puedo escribir.

Pen pal number 152

Hello, my name is Adam, I am 21 years old and I live in Sheffield. I was diagnosed with AS at the age of 13.

My interests are listening to various kinds of music, watching all kinds of films, playing a card game called Yu-Gi-Oh!, reading and also having a very active interest in wrestling (mainly WWE and TNA).

There are not many people that I know with Asperger's and would like to meet/talk to more people with AS. Letters from anywhere in the UK will be very much appreciated.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Dear Goth

As always this edition of *AU* (73) spoke directly to me. Sometimes it is a particular piece, more often a combination of various sections by many contributors. In this edition you yourself commented that you felt that, like the contributor, you had theory of mind and empathy.

Perhaps I can suggest that the attention to detail of those on the "spectrum" allows us to intuitively anticipate the needs of others, eg., if someone trips and falls in front of me, I have no gasp or sharp intake of breath, but I immediately process whether they need help and whether they look like they will accept it. In my youth I would be paralysed by social ineptitude at such an event but I would have wanted to help: now I step forward. I feel no "echo" of another's suffering so NTs see me as uncaring.

As you commented NTs lay claim to empathy, in fact the lack of same is taken as a significant "symptom" in the mental-health field. My own lack of empathy led to a suggestion of Asperger's (although my most recent psychiatrist does not believe Asperger's exists.)

Yet NTs find it impossible to empathise with us.

As many contributors to your wonderful publication have observed, NTs' tendency to dismiss autistic experience causes many of the problems they (NTs) then go on to treat. Eg., identity problems, depression etc.

It is strange that those equipped with this "amazing gift" cannot use it to contemplate the possibility that the autistic person may be frozen to complete mental and physical immobility by the smallest input, eg., a sign, colour, smell, offhand remark to list only a few.

Over my 50-plus years (minus childhood, of which I have no memory) I have explained my difficulties to countless "empaths" and on every occasion had my concerns dismissed, instead to focus on the perceived "problems" — usually depression.

Perhaps the empathy itself is the problem. Perhaps the NTs can only process what they can echo?

They seem unable to imagine a level of shyness that can totally incapacitate you, or to contemplate an attention to conversation so intense that each word must be analysed over and over, or the fear instilled by the realisation that people do not mean what they say.

Is the problem perhaps that the autistic condition by its very nature cannot be experienced empathetically and as the majority of health care professionals are NTs is there any hope of change?

Thank you again for the work you do, I hope to communicate further in the future.

Robert

I tried not to have Asperger's
But it didn't work out
Even though I cried
And had a pout

I told everyone I knew
I was not too pleased
Because before
I used to get teased

I wrote down my thoughts
That was all I could do
What I'm feeling
Shown to you

It has gone some way
To improving my life
And reducing my intake
Of pain and strife!

Thomas

letters to the Editor

AU edition 72 had fantastic articles on *Racing thoughts*, insomnia and creativity; thanks. At age 30 I attended my first Twelve-Step Anonymous meeting (Obese Anonymous to lose weight). I then attended free weekly meetings. My first "gift" was acceptance. My second "gift" was serenity. I define serenity as the ability to turn on/off "racing thoughts" and fear, especially at bedtime. The "coulda/woulda/shoulda" thoughts that ruined most of my needed sleep. Before Anonymous meetings I had insomnia, fear, anxiety, and was often rude to others (mostly unintentionally). Pretty quickly (maybe eight meetings) I realized I had achieved a serenity I had never before felt. Calmness, peace and control were new and wonderful feelings replacing fear and anxiety. I even tolerated NTs better and have gone over twenty-five years without hearing "Mr S, you're technically brilliant but you piss people off so we have to terminate your employment". I was terminated at least three times before I attended Anonymous meetings.

Anyone can "hide" in an Anonymous meeting. No requirement to talk or share anything. I simply listened at my first three meetings. But somehow I received many "gifts" from these Anonymous meetings, including serenity and its cure for insomnia.

My university science degree was useless in understanding how or why; it simply works. There are probably dozens of different free Anonymous groups meeting every night in every city (and many small towns too). Try a few, hopefully somewhere will feel right and then "take what you like, and leave the rest".

Serene, restful sleep and pleasant dreams

Serene and joyful Canadian Aspie

Cara Dovecott wishes to express her thanks to all those who contacted her about her articles about autism and sexuality which *AU* published last year. She received some heartfelt and insightful comments. There was not enough interest for a third article. All correspondence received was handled in confidence and has been deleted from her computer. In October Cara wrote on disability activism and remembrance day. There was no interest in a follow up piece.

Hi guys,

in your October edition: some good stuff! But one item in particular stood out to me. It was a letter to the Goth from someone called Steve. He wondered if he was alone in the view of how the NAS mostly caters for children.

Well I have to say I completely agree with him! I wasn't going to bother writing in, but I've just had an e-mail about the NAS Christmas cards, and how the NAS wants to "make a *real* difference to *people* living with autism".

I actually laughed out loud! But with some contempt (like Sheldon in *The big bang theory*).

What services does the NAS offer adults with autism in my area? What "real difference" have the NAS made to me? Or any other adult in my area? If there are services in my area, they're not very well known. Not even my doctor knows of any! He didn't even know where to refer me for an assessment! And *more than* a year later, I still haven't been assessed! He said he knows what to do for children but not for adults. (He also said I was his first adult!)

I'm sorry to rant guys, and I really don't wish to cause anyone any offence — that's not my intention. I feel the NAS *are* doing good work — for children. But *come on guys, children turn into adults — will they be forgotten too?*

I have had the Autism Alert Card from the NAS shop: it's a great idea and I'm extremely grateful for it. Whomever came up with the idea is a genius, but as for NAS services for adults, the card and *Asperger United* magazine are all I've used. I just don't know of anything else around

With much respect,

Mikey!

a letter, a photograph and a notice

This is an open email letter to Eleni and Elkie, contributors to the January edition of *AU*, and to all *AU* readers.

Eleni, those who treat you with disrespect and disbelief do so from prejudice — human judgment is too often predicated on prejudice. Prejudice is a blinkered and ingrained commitment to error — it abuses, often with impunity, human reason. It spreads its burden of ill consequences unashamedly. You will not find that with cats.

Elkie, without prejudice, I judge myself to have enjoyed mental health for all of my sixty-

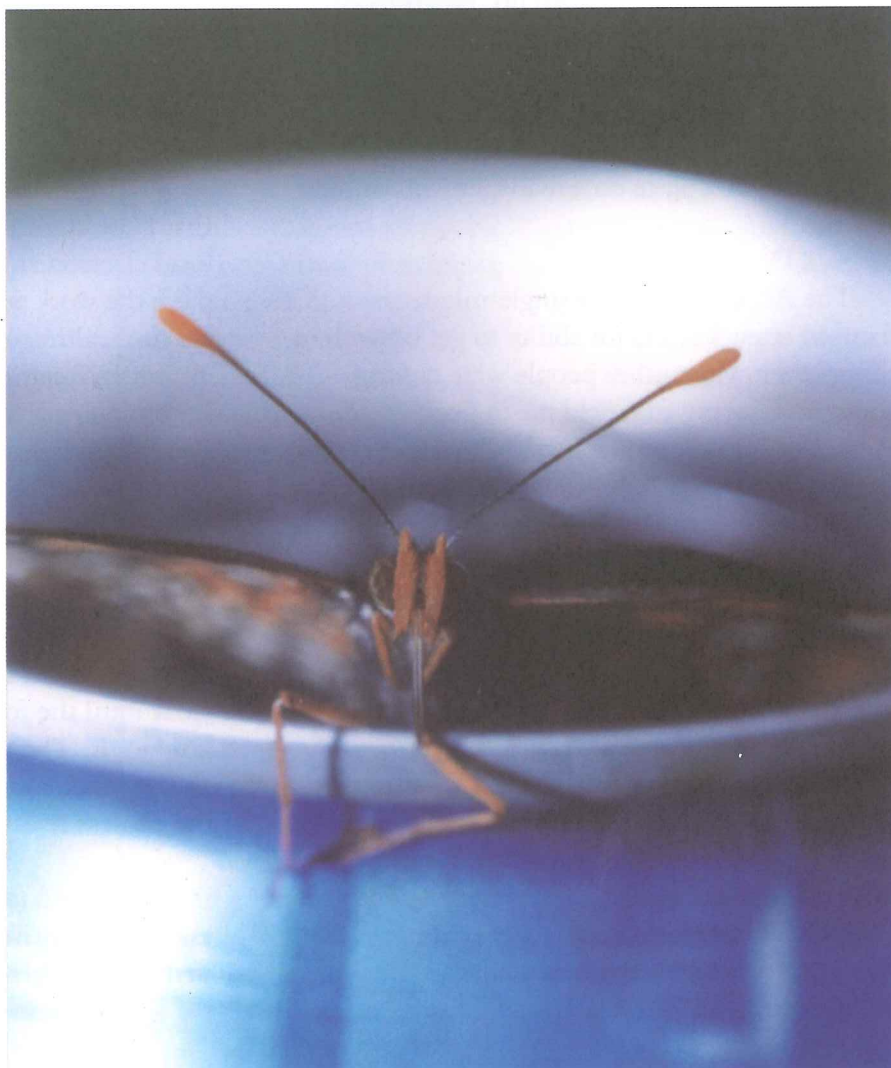
plus years. I consider my AS (diagnosed belatedly and for me that may have been fortuitous) to be in balance. Like Eleni, I have no friends (intimate or otherwise), no social life, no job and I too live alone (in terms of humans), independently. I have the good fortune to be suited to all of it.

Isolation and solitude can be poisonous to mental health. For me, being apart from humans is my nectar, my salvation. I have my cat.

Michael

mackenzie.michael33@yahoo.com

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for July will be **Mental Health**. **Pleasure** and **insomnia** are also still possibilities. Remember, you can vote with your contributions: the more letters and e-mails sent in from different people on one subject, the more likely that that subject will be the theme. Writing on any subject is still welcome, as are ideas for new themes, fillers (for putting in small spaces like this) and artwork. Remember, if you want to see different content in *AU*, the best way to change it is to send something in!



by **Thomas**

The challenges of employment

by Richard

I was only diagnosed with Asperger's when I was 41. This came after twenty years of dealing with work-related problems that could not be explained at the time or were put down to my "strange" personality and a profound inability to behave like everyone else in a work environment.

The strange thing was that when I was studying for my A levels, I had a Saturday job at a supermarket. I was responsible for two aisles, making sure that the place was free of cardboard and all spillages were cleaned up. Apart from occasionally falling out with one of the managers (not seriously) and having a one-off confrontation with somebody in the warehouse (because he was throwing potatoes at people), I kept this job and earned myself a place on a management training scheme.

The Asperger traits of single-mindedness, focused attention and an ability to get on with things even when other people were larking about and having fun, held me in good stead.

I decided to go on to university and obtain a degree in environmental science and resigned to concentrate on my A levels.

My attempts to obtain work during university vacations through employment agencies was a mixed and sometimes depressing experience.

This was the first time I became aware that although I had the same to offer employers as other students looking for work, I was only ever offered the worst paid and hardest temporary positions in factories such as working in a noisy dairy or packing department whilst a friend landed office work.

This I started to realise was because of my lack of "teamwork skills" and an inability to socialise with my fellow employees. I could not

establish a professional relationship with the women that work in the employment agency. Whether or not this was discrimination, I still am not sure but it was the second point in my life when depression set in.

Hoping that when I graduated for the second time (master's degree), that the problems would not resurface, I started to apply for positions with major companies. Managed to get to the interview stage on ten occasions and was even offered a permanent position as a health-and-safety manager. This was later withdrawn as the company lost a major contract thanks to the Thatcher administration.

Feeling dispirited, I looked for any work that I could find and ended up working for a local electronics company. This was poorly paid, the work was alright but the environment was unhealthy with fumes from soldering and cigarettes freely circulating in the building. I was becoming ever more sensitive to this and the fluorescent lighting. I struggled to get on with the other workers and spent nearly all of the time plugged into my portable stereo.

I resigned and then had to fight the Department of Social Security in order to get Unemployment Benefit. Decided not to look for work until the following year because I just could not face it. The process of applying for jobs has always made me feel unwell, probably because of the endless rejection letters.

I managed to obtain employment as an assistant scientific officer. I felt pleased for the first time in ages and endeavoured to succeed in the job and gain promotion in a year or so.

I was literally sick with nerves on my first day and had to be taken home by my line manager. After this and for the next few months I seemed

to be doing alright with a good first report and I was even starting to put together a research paper. I was once again aware of the fact that I was not getting on very well with my colleagues but could not work out why and was missing verbal and other cues in my interaction with them. I suspect that I appeared strange and somewhat disconnected from them and was perceived as some kind of threat — all down to my Asperger's?

My line manager was promoted and my new line managers were the section head and another man. From day one, I could not do anything right. My laboratory work was suddenly of poor quality, I was criticised for not being able to service the testing equipment (not a requirement of the job when I applied for it) and I became a frequent visitor to his office. My colleague started to wind me up by saying that I was urgently required to see my manager and invariably he had not made such a request. I did not cope well with this pressure and on at least two occasions damaged doors and lab equipment because of my frustrations.

After a protracted period of fighting my impending dismissal (with the help of my union), I left.

It took over a year to regain my confidence and get another job.

I was fired from several more jobs in the next twenty years and the dismissals followed a similar path. I would like to detail what happened in my last job at some point. I am now in receipt of sickness benefits and keep sane by looking after my two companion animals, my father, and doing some conservation work.

Dear Goth,

a lot of Aspies seem to take an interest in God. I "discovered" God when I was 13. I felt the need for that comfort of someone who would watch over and care for me: I felt convinced I was a believer!

It was obvious that God is not an old man with a long white beard, sitting on a cloud . . . but what is He? I decided, at that age, to try to solve this question. God had given me a brain, and the most worthy thing I could do, to honour Him, would be to try to really understand what He is.

Since Copernicus people have been afraid of thinking too hard, as observation seems to disprove the existence of God, but I decided to have sufficient faith to go wherever the evidence led me

Well, to cut a very long story short, I have dedicated my life to answering this question. And just over a year ago, after forty-seven years of searching, I found the answer.

The difficulty I have is, having Asperger's, I'm not good at explaining things, but I'll do my best:

God does exist. But not as a physical entity outside of ourselves. It is something within our

minds. Something related to our ideas of mortality and self-awareness. Consider this: what is money? We can all see that "the coins in my pocket" is not a sufficient answer. Money seems no more than a mark in cyberspace, all linked to "confidence". Yet when we look around, it is obvious that our entire modern society is built on it and could not function without it.

So do not think that God is any less for existing "only" in our minds. I feel that this makes God even more powerful. In fact I feel that understanding God in this way unites all the gods as one — that is to say, unites all religions, all of people's views of God.

I'm hoping that some of the readers of this article will think through these ideas, to take them further. For instance, how religion is used to control people, both for good and ill. Its relationship to warfare. How knowing what God actually, physically is could be used to unite all religions and reconcile their differences. And more.

I hope you will print this in *AU*, as no letter I have written has ever been published before, and I think these ideas may help others.

Yours sincerely,

John

With *more* love from 3am!

by Mikey

It's 2:52am.

I'm wide awake!

I suppose my body is tired . . . kinda
(Actually I think I could go out dancing!)

But my mind! Gods, my mind annoys me! It just
will not shut up!

I've been out to a local 24hr supermarket to see if
they have something for sleep . . .

Nothing in the vitamins and aches-and-pains
section . . .

Maybe some sleepy night time drink . . . nope.

Just a couple of weirdos that look like they're
on drugs.

I actually look like a normal person, even with my
sunglasses on!

In the October Edition, on the back, there was a
letter from a guy called Rufus, *With love from 3am*
And at the end he quite nicely put, "Either way,
3am sucks". And you know what? I agree.

In fact I hate bed-time all together. Sometimes I
just don't see the point. I'm not tired!

But then, sometimes I'm so tired, I'm sure I'd just
drift off as soon as I hit the pillow . . . but alas
no . . .

My mind blatantly refuses to shut down!

"Try writing your thoughts and worries down." If I
had a pound for every time someone has
mentioned that . . .

I've done that before . . . I still do sometimes . . .
it doesn't work. It's not a magic incantation
or Roman curse etched into lead that
mysteriously switches the brain off.

Some people want to know what's on my mind . . .
But I bottle things up . . .

I don't particularly like talking . . .

Perhaps I could write them. (I've always
preferred visual communication.)

How about frustration? Sexual frustration!
Being in a relationship with someone for eight
years, who has the sex-drive of a tortoise . . .

Well . . . it's not much fun. If I remember rightly,
the tortoise and the rabbit weren't exactly the
best of friends.

He's snoring too. Like a pig!

Being ignored frustrates one too. He sits there,
and when you do actually voice an opinion . . .
nothing.

Perhaps I mumbled it. . . . Perhaps I only thought
it instead, and it didn't actually come out, just
like he said.

I've been saving up for some stormtrooper
armour . . . but then for some reason they're
ignoring me now, too.

The place I'm supposed to get it from asked for
contact details . . .

I gave them . . .

Told them why it had my partner's/carer's name
on the address ("I have high-functioning
autism").

That was nearly ten days ago now.

Perhaps I'm being paranoid . . .

Strange thing, train of thought . . .

Strange thing the brain . . .

If only it could work like this laptop: sleep,
shutdown, hibernate, "safe mode"!

Mind you, I think I do go into safe mode
sometimes . . .

When I have "an episode".

Some people call it "shutdown" or "meltdown".

I just seem to turn into a non-verbal . . .
. . . thing.

Just standing there . . . waiting to be moved on.

Only basic movements, and funny noises . . .
just like "safe mode".

He called it safe mode once . . .

So others can see I'm "broken" . . . and vulnerable.

I could go on . . . and on . . . but I won't keep you!

It's like the TV and radio are on at the same time . . .

In a crowded room . . .

And everyone's trying to talk to all at once.
Please . . . shhhh!

So here's to you, Rufus! I hold up an imaginary
wine glass:
3 am sucks.

Unlike you though, I have to be up for 6, and get
ready for work. I can't stay in bed till 2pm!

I think it might be wise to just stay up (I feel
really groggy after a nap. In fact, after any
sleep at all . . . I've *never* woken up refreshed.
Another pointless part of bed-time!)

Get ready for work . . .

Do my nine hours . . .

Come home . . .

And do it all again!

Asperger's syndrome and autism as portrayed in the media and fiction

by Sam

Having written a dissertation on the portrayal of Asperger's syndrome in film and literature, I'm no stranger to the various stereotypes that surround it. Fiction widely regards the autistic spectrum as being either a wellspring of superpowers or a source of crippling disability with no discernible middle ground.

As such, it came as a huge surprise to find that one of the most relatable and positive portrayals of the autistic spectrum in recent memory came not from the old establishments of cinema and literature but from their younger media brother: videogames.

Earlier this year, *Tales of Graces f* was released on the PlayStation 3 and featured a character by the name of Pascal: a woman who very obviously has AS. She has a childlike optimism and enthusiasm for anything

technological and talks at lengths about her passions. When she doesn't think anything is important enough to be worth her time, like explaining the ins and outs of her research or taking a bath, her explanations become monosyllabic grunts. She's also blind to social subtleties and struggles to grasp the romantic subtext of her admirer's love confession. All of these oddities and more, however, are respected and portrayed as part of the character's eccentric charm rather than as an intimidating "difference" that must be purged with social fire.

So, naturally, it came as a huge shock to me that the writers never actually came out and said that Pascal was autistic.

From a narrative perspective, this made sense. The girl was helping to save the world and it was only natural that she and her friends would be more concerned with

doing than worrying about her state of mind. Furthermore, by avoiding the issue, the developers succeeded where a lot of filmmakers fail by allowing Pascal to be her own woman. Because her personality wasn't prematurely written off as "autistic", she was allowed to grow and develop like the rest of the cast: which is more than can be said for a lot of cinematic portrayals.

Unfortunately, the fact that the writers never spell out what's right in front of us means that all the gamers who don't know about the condition have missed out on the chance to be introduced to it and learn that those on the spectrum are human beings like anyone else. Considering just how much dialogue is in the game, it doesn't seem like it would have been so hard to have just dropped a name once or twice. Then again, I suppose Hans Asperger never lived in fantasyland.

Work

part one

by Julie

This piece is about my experiences of work and my thoughts on the effects of Asperger's in that context. Bear in mind that my own Aspie diagnosis is only about thirty months old so I am still exploring the concept, and that it came after I stopped work, so I have not had a chance to test any of these notions. So I may be partly or completely wrong. I would be interested in comments and comparisons.

Warning to neurotypicals: you may feel insulted and angry at some of the things I say. That is most certainly not my intention. Please bear in mind that I am trying to make sense of a difficult and frightening thing, which I perceive quite differently to the way you perceive it.

Warning to Aspies: yes, it is indeed difficult and frightening, and it may make you feel uncertain and worried. Please try not to worry: remember that the pattern you perceive is never complete, though usually it is at least complete enough that you can work with it and explore it further.

To proceed.

I am no longer working. I officially retired a few months ago, some five months after my sixtieth birthday, but I had been unemployed for three years prior to that.

I have had a varied experience of work, but to begin with I felt I was managing it well. Like many Aspies, I found myself suited to engineering, and I obtained an MSc in electronics. I was taken on by a local company specialising in aerospace research and development (R&D), and stayed with that company for twelve years. Then I wanted a

bit of a change, and moved to a company a few miles further away to work on fibre-optic communications. Generally, I felt that I did reasonably well at both establishments.

The troubles started in 1990. The fibre-optic company where I worked was bought up by an organisation that did not wish to do R&D and made the R&D department redundant, which left twelve of us without work. I found another job within a month in another town, once again working on fibre optics. Like many companies, this place takes on new employees for a "probationary period" lasting about three months, at the end of which they decide whether to keep you or not. They did decide to keep me, and gave me a rise into the bargain. I was awarded a bonus at Christmas. Everything seemed to be going reasonably well . . .

And then, a week after the Christmas break, I was told I was lazy and incompetent. Before I could find another job, they fired me.

I could speculate forever about why this happened. It is true that the task I had been given was encountering problems, but these were down to their unwillingness to take my professional advice on how to go about it. This was unreasonable: I had been hired for my knowledge of fibre-optic systems, and they ignored me when I tried to tell them what changes they needed to make to their system for the whole to work! It is also true that the man I had been hired to replace reappeared just before Christmas on a friendly visit: I never discovered whether he replaced me after I left.

Hindsight is wonderful. What I *should* have done, since they would not listen to me, was to

call in an advisor, either to help me persuade them of what they should do, or to suggest an alternative. Companies who sell electronic components have such people available: they are known as applications engineers. Unfortunately this possibility simply did not occur to me. I realise now that I should not have kept the problem to myself, but I should have discussed it with someone. I don't know if keeping problems to oneself, or simply not realising that it is acceptable to discuss them, is a typical Asperger thing or not.

I was without a job for three years, since this happened at the beginning of a quite severe recession. It did not help in the least that I am useless at interviews, especially so-called "stress" interviews. I managed to find my way back into the jobs market by applying for "casual employment" at another local company. Again this was technical work, and involved computer programming. After a few months I was offered a permanent position. The only unfortunate thing about this was that my salary was very much lower than what I had been earning at my previous employer, but at least it was a start.

I remained within this company for a total of thirteen years, though I moved twice between departments. It was after the second move that things began to go bad again. In this particular department I began to find that I was not being taken seriously: that people simply did not believe that I had any knowledge or experience, and this was despite the fact that my CV was available for all to read on the company intranet. I asked Personnel ("Human Resources") several times for assistance in this matter, but to no effect.

I will give an example of this failure in perception by others. I wrote a complex and detailed program in Visual Basic to handle certain data-gathering processes. It worked well. I was moved on to other jobs and this program was handed to someone else to maintain and upgrade. I didn't mind that: what I *did* mind was when they refused to believe I could possibly have written the program myself.

Things went from bad to worse. I was instructed to take advice on a piece of electronics design from someone who knew almost nothing about the subject, and who had chosen a system for me to work with that was hopelessly unsuited to the task we were to do. On another job, I designed and built a system to do a particular job, and did it well, but another person convinced my colleagues that it could not possibly have worked and persuaded them to use his own system instead — in spite of the existence of clear evidence and supporting technical information that it did work, which was simply ignored. Another project would have run into external administrative problems severe enough to have made it probably unworkable, and when I tried to warn them of this and tell them where and with whom to check, again I was ignored. Note that I was not asking them to take my word on it — I had referred them to the official body which deals with these matters. They did not take up that suggestion.

I asked to be taken off the project, because there would be personal problems for me if I were involved with it and things went as wrong as I expected them to. And my line manager accused my attempt to warn them of the likely problems of being "sarcastic"!

Then they tried to turn me into a project manager, an area where I had absolutely no experience. I asked to be taken off that and to be given something more in line with my technical background. I even offered to take a year off to get my training up to date, but they declined, and suggested I take early retirement — or be made redundant. I took the money and left. This was in 2007, as the current recession was just beginning.

It was not until some months after I left that I was diagnosed with AS. I don't know if it would have helped me to know sooner.

I am trying to analyse those problems in the light of the diagnosis. I have had a few tentative thoughts on the matter, which will appear next quarter.

Pleasurable activities

by Katie

Pleasurable activities, I believe, are an important part of everyone's everyday life. They provide the opportunity to enable individuals to develop, and heighten, feelings of self-worth and happiness.

As an individual with Asperger's syndrome I often find simple aspects of everyday life overwhelming. This, at times, causes me to feel like there is just too much information going into my brain and I can suddenly become overloaded. This heightened sense of awareness, whereby I feel my brain is trying to process everything at once, causes an increased level of anxiety which therefore makes even the simplest communication or social exchange confusing and often leaves me feeling drained and discouraged, lowering my self-confidence and self-esteem.

I therefore believe that it is even more critical for people with an autism-spectrum disorder to regularly engage in an activity which they find pleasurable, as this is a sure way to boost confidence and restore self-esteem.

For me, as with many people with Asperger's syndrome, I have managed to incorporate my pleasurable activity into my chosen area of work. I am a freelance artist. So, therefore, I am able to develop a career around an activity which I find pleasurable. This has multiple benefits. It decreases my overall stress and anxiety in the workplace because I am able to engage in an activity which makes me happy and boosts my confidence and self-esteem, which makes me more relaxed when dealing with everyday issues surrounding communication and social interaction. It does not alleviate my anxiety but it goes a long way to helping me become more relaxed in social situations which I find challenging.

I also feel, however, that it is just as important to take regular time out from the confusing,

overloading aspects of the world and focus solely on something which provides you with pleasure. I find it does not even have to be a structured or meaningful activity. It is important, I believe, to work out what brings pleasure for you as an individual, and to use it as a way of calming yourself down when things feel like they are getting too much.

I have many simple things, alongside my art, which bring me pleasure, such as: holding certain types of fabric, or listening to Harry Potter on audiobook over and over again. I find repetition is one of the key simple things that brings me pleasure.

Everyone with Asperger's syndrome is different and individual. Therefore, what is pleasurable for one person might differ entirely in comparison to what is pleasurable for another. The key is to work out what is pleasurable for you and to learn to use it to help balance the difficulties that come along with Asperger's syndrome.



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

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