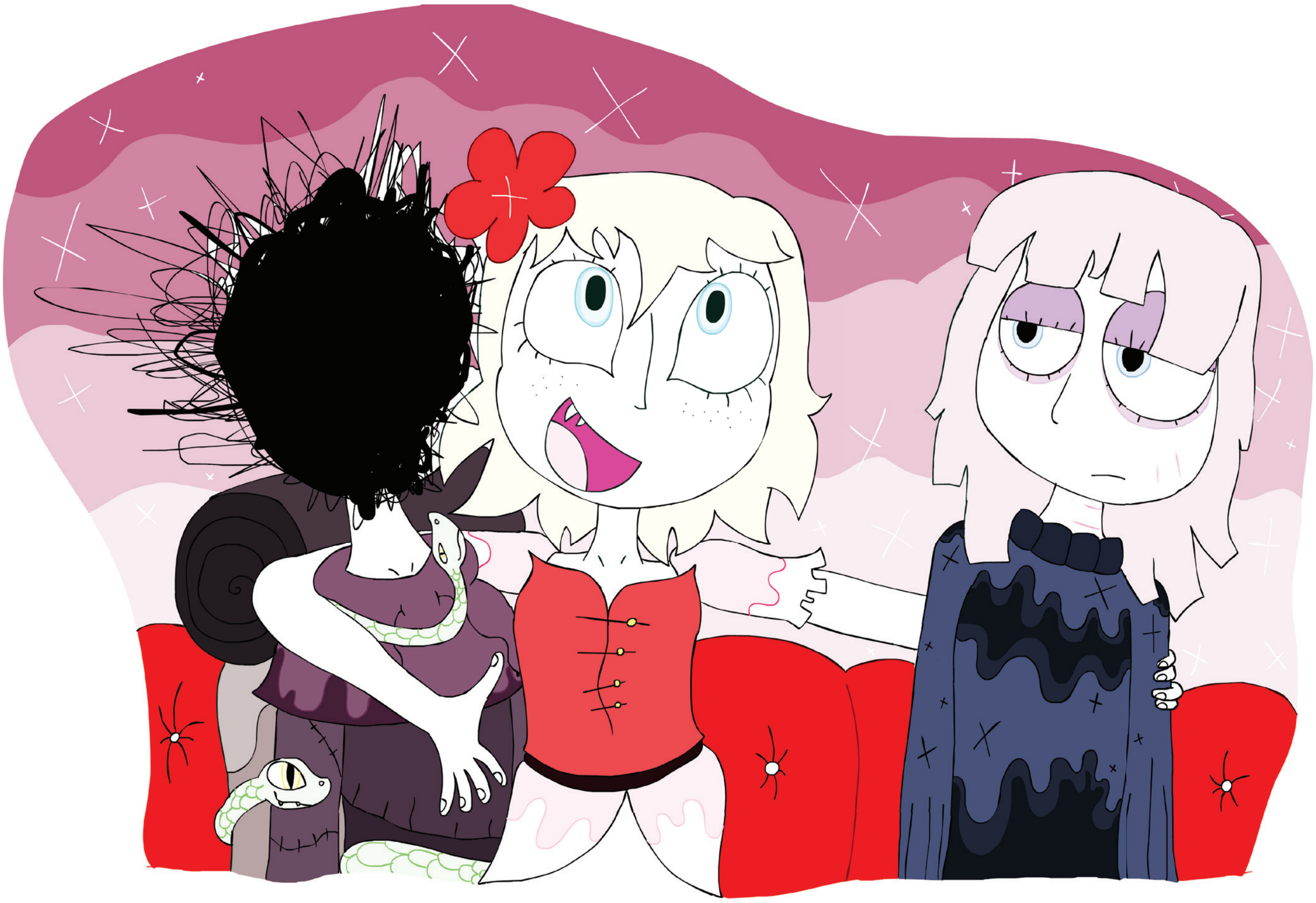
Produced by and for autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **100** October 2019



National Autistic Society

The Spectrum

The Spectrum is run by and for autistic adults (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-sixteens). The magazine aims to connect autistic people through their letters and articles and to share information so that they can lead more independent lives.

Please note that *the Spectrum* receives many letters each quarter so it is not possible to respond to every one, nor for every contribution to be printed. Discussions on editorial choices will not be entered into. The magazine protects the identity of contributors by not printing full names unless the writer asks for their full name to be used.

The Spectrum is available at
www.autism.org.uk/thespectrum
or by paying a subscription. To subscribe you, we need your postal address. Please subscribe online or contact the Goth for a subscription form. All contact details are below. Organisations requiring multiple copies: please get in touch.

Editor: the Goth

National Autistic Society production support: the Content Team

NAS phone support: the Supporter Care Team

NAS database support: the Data Services Team

This magazine was founded as *Asperger United* in 1993 by Pamela Yates and Patricia Howlin, in association with the Maudsley Hospital, and Mark Bebbington and Judy Lynch of the National Autistic Society.

This was in response to a recognised dearth of services for people with Asperger syndrome and the potential for self-help and networking as a means of support for this group.

The provisions for editor's and sub-editor's post was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at. This post also provided the possibility of work experience and responsibility and has benefited those who have held the position. These are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce and the current editor, the Goth (who does not wear black).

Pamela Yates provided support and advice to the editors until the publication was handed over to the National Autistic Society in 2000.

The name *Asperger United* was chosen by the group of original readers as the most "appropriate name" for the publication. This was suggested by Anna Kaczynski. The name *the Spectrum* was suggested by dozens of people and chosen in an online poll in 2018.

Please send all correspondence and subscription requests to:

Email: **the.spectrum@nas.org.uk**

The Goth
c/o The National Autistic Society
393 City Road
London
EC1V 1NG

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

All we need is your email address and we will add you to the email notification list.

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

Tel: **020 7923 5779** (geographical charges apply)

The Spectrum is available in large print on A3 sheets (double the size of this page). If you need large print, please let us know using the email address or postal address above.

Contributions for the next issue should reach *the Spectrum* by **11 November 2019**

Welcome to the October edition of *the Spectrum*.

Well, it's October again, so it must be time for me to bore you about my Autscape experience!

For the second year running I did not ask anyone at Autscape to write anything about the conference (unlike the previous eight years) so, naturally, this is only the second year that anyone has written anything about Autscape! The human mind can be baffling to me sometimes.

Every year I want to spend lots of time talking to people and enjoying the facilities, which always include a well-equipped sensory room, but every year there are just so many interesting lectures, seminars, discussions and workshops. Just attending all of those would leave me exhausted, so I let the social side of things slide yet again.

Naturally, that leaves me worrying that various people will think that I don't like them — I imagine that many readers can relate to that feeling, along with the feeling that I can't start talking to someone because they might not want me to talk to them. For the record, I am always willing to be approached, and if I don't respond much it's probably because I'm overwhelmed.

Yours,

the Editor

the social edition — suggestion for next issue on page 17

Contents

Socialising and loneliness

Autism and my experience in a cult, what made me vulnerable and what I did after I left

by **Richard**

My name is Richard, I'm 36, I have a specific learning difficulty, I am autistic, and from 2014 to 2017 I was a member of a cult. When I tell people this I am usually met with wide eyes and a long string of questions. What do I mean when I use that word, cult? I use it as a description of a group which takes over your identity, uses unethical methods of coercion and control and exploits people, a group which is often run by a narcissistic leader who uses his or her followers to meet their own needs. The group I was in was a bible-based cult. However, when I left I watched Leah Remini's documentary on Scientology and I can quite comfortably tell you that there were lots of similarities. They taught that if you gave them money, God would bless you and you would have "breakthrough" in your life and everybody worshipped the leaders like gods. It was very controlling and a strange environment to be in.

My experience began when I ended up working for a charity which I thought was run by a conventional Christian group, but at my most intense involvement with the group, I worked for the cult's "charity": I attended their meetings and I also lived with them. But how did I get involved? Prior to joining I was spending a lot of time on my own, I was struggling to make friends or form any kind of close relationships and in addition to this, following years of feeling like a misfit and bullying impacting my self-esteem, I considered myself to have been fairly vulnerable. Sadly, my difficulties socialising and with loneliness made me a target for the cult's brand of coercion and manipulation.

People often ask me; did you know it was a cult when you joined? My first months involved with them were exciting and I was regularly on the receiving end of what cult experts often call "love-bombing", a process whereby you are treated like the most important, amazing person who ever lived and bombarded with compliments. It felt amazing, especially as I had felt so alone and low, and I was drawn right in. Unfortunately, I was unaware of what love-bombing was and I later realised that this was a manipulation technique taught by the cult to entrap people and buy their loyalty. I even, at that time, defended them when my friend warned me it was a cult, mainly because they said such nice things about me all the time, which I now label as grooming.

There were warning signs, though, from the beginning. One of the leaders did a talk on why the cult wasn't controlling, and it was just because they cared about the members, plus I was also aware of how much they went on about giving money, which seemed strange to me. But I just dismissed this because it felt so exciting.

The worst moments in the group happened when I entered a relationship with another member. At that moment I was called in for a meeting with one of the leaders, who was also my manager. He told me that I needed to "learn to submit to the leadership" and that I needed to obey them, and also told me I wasn't allowed to kiss my girlfriend, sleep in the same building as her and that I wasn't to move to her location, that because she was a woman she was to move to me and that "women must learn to submit to men." At this point I thought, "This guy is crazy!" However, over the course of my relationship it became apparent that these views and behaviours were the cult's views, not just his. My girlfriend had been taught that I was not allowed to choose how I was to propose to her and I had to come to the leadership so they could tell me how to propose. She also told me how the leaders had told her to cut her mum out of her life and controlled who she lived with.

Inevitably the relationship broke; I felt I was being monitored; they even rang around to check where I had slept when I visited her (she was 29 and I was 32). One day we had a falling out caused by the pressure and strain of feeling like I was being watched and because of a complete lack of confidentiality in the group. No relationship could be healthy in the group and the leadership broke us up. I eventually received a letter sent from the cult's HQ, claiming to be from my ex-girlfriend, it had somebody else's handwriting on the envelope and it was typed. It stated, "I am fully accountable to the leadership in my world" and claimed to be from my ex-girlfriend, stating she didn't want to see me again, clearly not written by her. Following this her friend told me she was being controlled by somebody in leadership.

To cut a very long and complicated story short, I was called into another meeting with the same leader who originally spoke to me at the start of the relationship, who again gave me a speech about how I needed to "learn to submit", then he told me that the leadership had the right to break up relationships or stop people getting married.

To a certain extent, I think that the autism also probably protected me, as I spoke my mind often and couldn't tolerate injustice and they didn't like that: you weren't supposed to challenge or question the leadership. However, because my autism makes me incredibly focused and hardworking, they saw that in me and used me. When I am passionate about something, I give everything and the blinkers go on, I stop caring about money or even noticing if I am being used. I needed friends and my cult saw that, I needed encouragement and they used that to buy me: I was vulnerable and couldn't detect their motives, and they tried to take control over my life — they groomed me. I worked hard for their charity and gave them lots of money and then got pushed out when I wouldn't obey the leadership, they changed my job role and left me out of meetings so that I would eventually quit, which I did.

Fortunately, this story hasn't got a sad ending. I trained as a lecturer in mental health and counselling and then did a masters in the psychology of coercive control and last week I spoke at an international conference on cults and my experiences. Cults are now my "special interest". I have had to learn what a healthy friendship looks like and how to spot when people are trying to take advantage of me. Even then though I feel very cautious about trusting people, but now there are people in my life who I can check things with, who I have met through education and who don't try and use me and I am incredibly grateful for their input in my life. There are still lots of good people in this world, I just needed to ask for help to find them.

If you are concerned that you may be involved with a cult, or if someone you love is involved with a cult, then information is available at:

https://cultinformation.org.uk

Some similar sites are actually run by cults and give disinformation, but this site has a good reputation.

If you are unsure if you are involved in a cult, or in any other situation where someone is coercing you, look up information on the BITE model. BITE stands for Behavioural control, Information control, Thought control and Emotional control. The BITE model was developed by Steven Hassan, who is a professional counsellor in the United States and who has written extensively on cults and mind control, including three books. Professionals (psychologists and counsellors) argue about whether the BITE model is correct, but even if it is not entirely accurate, it is useful for helping you to work out whether you are in a coercive relationship or not, and that is what is important when you are worried about your situation, Editor.

Hi, I'm Connell.

I was diagnosed with Autism from the age of 2 and I do have my specific interests especially when it comes to football and music.

Throughout my life there's been challenges and bumps along the road; through my experiences I've grown up a lot and I thank my family being there for me, as I couldn't have done it without them.

I was told that I'd never be able to read, write or even talk and I was nonverbal until the age of 6 being told that I'd never do anything significant.

Well I definitely proved them wrong as I have aspirations of going into sport coaching, as I truly believe that sport brings everyone together regardless of background and I love the opportunity of making a difference to another person.

I went to a special needs school and I was there for eleven years: it was truly a great experience as I had wonderful teachers and friends around me throughout my time at the school.

When I left school at 16, I went to Colchester Institute.

I was in that bubble and I truly didn't know what to expect with college as I was nervous, anxious and petrified with the ginormous environment and masses of people but leaving school shaped me into the person I am today.

I made new friends and my course tutors were nothing but fantastic to me.

I'm now 18, currently a college student and going on to a sport coaching course, which is remarkable for someone like me: as well as being an FA level 1 qualified coach I'm hoping to do my FA level 2 in a few years.

I am also an ambassador for a fantastic organisation called the Multi Schools Council which helps break down negative perceptions of people with SEN and to improve understanding in schools about SEN, as often pupils aren't taught about our differences and we're aiming to change that.

I've won an award for outstanding achievement and recently won a Colchester Youth Award for my personal journey through life.

I truly credit my wonderful, supportive family for helping me on this journey through life because they are my rock and inspiration.

People often see Autism as a negative when autistic people are dedicated, passionate, gifted, creative and amazing.

Remember this: Autism is a positive thing.

39

by **Kate**

I've lost my mouth
it fell off, before
I could catch it
I saw
it go
away
now it's free
floating somewhere
with the other names of things

I try to get them back
they don't want to
be here in
correct
People land
angry here
sad here
all the confusing things
here
upside down so
all the safe things
fall
and

float

away

Pen pals

Pen pal number 292

Hi everyone, my name is Mattie. I am 19 years old, have high-functioning autism, and I would really like to get to know someone of like mind. I live in Herefordshire. My interests include reading, listening to music, and studying science, particularly biology. I am also very into animated shows and films. It would be great if anyone is interested in contacting me.

Pen pal number 293

I am a 55-year-old adult who has been diagnosed with autism at the age of 51. I have also been diagnosed with fibromyalgia and dyslexia. My interests are Marvel and DC comic book genres in TV and films, *Doctor who?* and *Star trek DS9* as well anything to do with Scotland. My other interests are basic meteorology, SETI, and space exploration. I am looking for a pen-pal with similar interests.

Thank you,

Katrine

Pen pal number 294

I am Christine and looking to speak to other people recently diagnosed. I am 60 years old, love walking and reading.

Thirteen pen-pal adverts have been held over for publication in the next two issues, Editor.

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 this magazine. 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 this magazine 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 this magazine.
- If you get no replies, please don't take this personally.

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 the Goth, c/o The National Autistic Society, 393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG, or email **the.Spectrum@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 this magazine are opened before being passed on.

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

This magazine 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 / *the Spectrum* cannot intervene or be held responsible for any ensuing correspondence between letter-writers.

Pen pal number 295

Hello I'm Patricia, 45 from Scotland, looking for friends. I have Asperger's, late being diagnosed. I like animals, wildlife, adult colouring, watching a good film, music — range from heavy metal to classical. Hope to hear from you soon.

Pen pal number 296

Hello, my name is Tom and I'm 24. I was diagnosed with Autism when I was 2. I am currently an admin apprentice at my local hospital. I am looking for anyone to chat to via email; I honestly don't mind. It would be nice to meet more people who understand Autism.

My hobbies and interests are: music (I play bass guitar and percussion — I have a YouTube channel), TV (documentaries, detective shows, comedies), videogames, technology, computers, travelling, being with friends and family, psychology. I also love all animals. I like fashion like smart and smart casual clothes.

Thanks for reading and take care.

Pen pal number 297

Hi, I'm Adam and am 34. I was diagnosed with high-functioning autism in my mid 20s.

My interests are sci-fi, especially *Star trek*, *Doctor who?*, and *Sliders*. I also love animals and have two collie dogs and sometimes look after two goats at a nearby farm. I find animals are therapeutic and reduce my anxiety.

I live in Gloucestershire and there are some lovely walks here which I take my dogs on.

I would like to hear from anyone with similar interests.

Pen pal number 298

I would like to hear from anyone who is high-functioning. I would like to hear from anyone who is genuinely looking for a pen pal. I am well educated and have many interests in current affairs, music, reading, and Art. I enjoy watching television, such as *the Gifted*, I enjoy sci-fi, costume dramas like *Victoria*, which is also faction, and documentaries. I also like animals and nature, like the sea, parks, and anywhere naturally beautiful. I also like people generally, but find that most NTs do not understand me. I will reply to all letters. Thank you for reading this and I hope to hear from you.

Jacqui

Pen pal number 299

Hi, my name is Alesya. I am 28. I live in London. I work in the criminal justice system and study criminology in university. I am looking for a friend to exchange letters. I prefer real letters sent through post.

I am currently waiting for my official assessment and am self-diagnosed. I need some support as I am going through this hard time trying to understand myself and autism. I feel like I have been taking myself to the limit in the past year where I had to work full-time and study full-time. I have made significant progress in learning communication but in the process I have exhausted all my powers. I want to find a friend that will be able to understand this. As I struggle to find understanding from people that are unaware of autism.

My interests include hiking and walking. I have several plans to walk some paths like Thames walk — half way through now. I want to walk the whole coastline. The only problem is finding time as I have very demanding work and kids.

I also like anything that is connected to crime — this is my long-term passion. Currently I am experiencing some serious burnout and don't enjoy things I enjoyed before. I hope to recover soon.

a sculpture and a poem

Wired differently

sculpture by **Kristina**

Poem

A space

too sma

for lines

or even

long wo

even
mediu-
length
words,

like,

“justifie

A space,

too sma

by

Jack V

The Spectrum,

autism and sex — it seems to me (wife and mother and grandmother) that this subject needs addressing. By both autistic and neurotypical people. I have tried but failed to find any discussion of it. (Maybe out of "political corrections"?)

My own experience, for a start, as an autistic person, has been that sex was certainly not pleasurable, but not exactly painful either: more than painful. Like squeaky chalk on blackboard, say, or a funny-bone or teeth-on-edge sensation, but magnified and internalized until it became more unbearable than pain: than, say, root-canal treatment. It is hard to describe. "Sensory overload" until all I wanted to do was die! I could not even tolerate kissing, stroking or any light brushing. Still can't.

I have never mentioned the way that autism affects and affected me in this way, either to the medical profession, my "lovers", or my family, but I think an honest discussion is long overdue, so I will start here, with you, at *the Spectrum*,

Nicky

I have to agree that many people seem to find the subject of sex too "delicate" to discuss sensibly, so it would be good to have an open conversation in the Spectrum. *I also note that you seem to be towards the sex-is-so-intense-it-hurts-too-much end of the spectrum, and that some people will be at the opposite end of the spectrum, or with experiences which don't neatly fit into the labels of "hypersensitive" or "hyposensitive". Everyone's feelings about this, no matter where they are on the spectrum, are welcome, Editor.*

Dear Sir or Madam,

I would like your opinion, please. I have Asperger's syndrome. People usually say to me, "You don't look autistic". Does anyone else on the spectrum receive such a comment? How do you handle it and how does it make you feel, please? This is causing me to have more anxiety than usual. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Rachel

Dear Goth,

on the subject of socialising and loneliness, I wanted to write about my own experiences of this. I was moved in to a new area last year and have been unable to make the same support networks as I had before. I tend to spend more time out of the town and in the moorlands, as this is where I have family and old neighbours whom I like to chat with. I am simply unable to re-create this in my present home, as I find it hard with people I do not know and also people live busy lives and do not have the time to chat. I am on the waiting list for a befriending service but that is still being set up so I may have a wait. I find it quite hard living alone as the four walls are not much company! I would like companionship but have no idea of how to go about this. I dream of living in an autism-friendly housing project with lots of people around me and this is something I have been pressing for with the local MP so maybe this may come true. Is this something other people on the spectrum would like I wonder?

Although I ride with a local cycling club, I still feel left out at times due to not knowing how to join in conversations. Sometimes I do, and try, but being an introvert does make this hard, as you can imagine. The interview with *Cycling weekly* did make a difference and riders are more aware and make an effort to understand, which is very helpful.

I do not wish to make this a miserable letter but am simply relating my expereinces. I hope others have better ones.

Nick

Autscape and socialising

by **Laura**

Edition 96 of *the Spectrum*, which was published in October 2018, included an article which I wrote about my experience at the Autscape conference in 2018. Having recently returned home after Autscape 2019 I decided to write another article about Autscape, this time with a focus on socialising, which the Goth had suggested as this edition's theme.

Autscape is an annual conference which is organised by and for autistic people. It is set up to try to accommodate needs which are shared by many autistic people, including sensory needs, difficulty with unstructured time and problems with socialising.

Personally, I find it really difficult to talk to people I don't know, and although this was my fourth Autscape — I've attended in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 — there were lots of unfamiliar people around whom I wanted to get to talk to. I do find it easier to talk to people at Autscape than I usually do, though, and that's because Autscape is set up to help people to socialise (if they want to).

Autscape runs "home groups" twice a day, to give people the chance to get to know people in small groups, where people can chat to others in a semi-structured situation. I facilitated a home group this year — helping to start discussions and making sure that everyone was included — and it was a great experience. I enjoyed meeting some new attendees and having the chance to get to know some people.

I also enjoy less structured opportunities to socialise, like chatting to a group of people whilst they finished a thousand-piece jigsaw (rather them than me — jigsaws aren't really my thing!) and staying up late playing a fun card game called Exploding Kittens (don't worry, it's not as gruesome as it sounds!).

Although Autscape provides plenty of opportunities to socialise, it's not compulsory to do so, and many people spend some of their time relaxing, going for walks, enjoying the sensory room or attending lectures without engaging in conversation with others. The "initiation badges" which are used at Autscape make it easier to spend time with other people without needing to interact, if people need some time to themselves, whilst also providing a way for people to indicate that they would like to interact but struggle to initiate conversation, if that's a problem for them.

I find socialising in an "autistic space" — an environment created by and for autistic people, which takes autistic people's needs into account and provides opportunities for everyone to participate fully — much more enjoyable than socialising usually is for me. Being able to communicate in the ways which come naturally to me, without being judged by others, and in an environment which meets my sensory needs, is a really positive experience. Although there are, inevitably, still stressful situations — misunderstandings, disagreements and so on — for the most part I have had enjoyable interactions with others at all of the Autscapes which I've attended.

I also find that I am much more motivated to socialise at Autscape than I am usually. I have experienced some real connections with fellow Autscape attendees over the years, and I feel like I get on much better with people there than I do generally. And there are so many different opportunities to connect with others at Autscape, including by talking about some of the experiences shared by many (but not all!) autistic people. For example, finding out at my first Autscape that there are other people who experience similar difficulties with executive functioning as I do has really been life-changing for me, and has helped me to accept myself more.

I really liked this year's Autscape, especially meeting so many new people and getting to catch up with people I don't see very often — there are some people I only see at Autscape, and it was lovely to see them again. Autscape's organisers work really hard to make Autscape a safe, supportive and enjoyable experience for all of the attendees, and I think that they do a great job. I'm already looking forward to next year's Autscape!

Morris

by **Mark**

For most of my life I've loved playing music. I've not been too fussed as to what kind, but when younger tended to play percussion in orchestras and wind bands, and occasionally in "the pit" for shows. Although I found some companionship amongst the other musicians, there wasn't often much time for interaction. In my teen years I saw morris dancers out and about and it always looked interesting. I tried to get someone in to teach a group of us in sixth form at school, but when he found we were a mixed-sex school, he refused (this was back in the 1970s, when some thought morris to be the remnants of an ancient male-fertility dance — a theory without basis).

When I was 22 and just recovering from both a failed marriage and glandular fever, I heard music coming from my neighbour's garden. He had an "occasional" morris team — *The world-famous Ashdown mummers* — practising for their biannual performance. Intrigued, I asked if they needed someone to play a drum, to which they agreed but on condition that I learn to dance first. That condition helped turn me into a good musician. A few weeks later I saw two groups dancing in town — so volunteered my musical services. One team were happy to have me playing drum, but not dance (as they were a women's dance team) whilst the other welcomed me with open arms as a new dancer/musician.

The first rehearsal for the men's team was a killer — I've never been particularly fit and hated PE at school. I think I made it through one three-minute-long dance. Over the following year my fitness increased enough to dance okay, although I'd never class myself as a good dancer — just one that wouldn't stand out in a dance; mild dyspraxia doesn't help. One big advantage of those early teams was there was an obligatory visit to the pub after practice. After a while, I ended up on a hospital visit for a hearing test as I had severe problems hearing people in the pub or making out one conversation: strangely my hearing was found to be perfect. At least I was going out two nights a week, and during the summer going away to festivals and "weekends of dance" or "ales" held by other teams. This gave me a much wider network of potential friends, though I never seemed able to progress beyond acquaintance to friend. The good thing about morris is that it's not competitive (okay, there are exceptions, and you can sort-of rank each team by standard). The dancing is trying to make sure that you're in the right place at the right time and dancing similar to the other people in the "set". So you're working as a team, but concentrating on what you're doing — almost akin to meditation, as you just concentrate on the one thing. It is, however, a performance, and the aim to entertain the public — unlike line-dancing or salsa classes.

In the first few years I ended up dancing (occasionally) and playing (most of the time) for five or six teams in the

South-East, including two that I'd co-founded. Although I was playing drum and recorder, I started to teach myself melodeon (a diatonic accordion that plays only in two keys, with two notes per button (push and pull) like a mouth organ). I'd found that other musicians were ignoring my beat and speed on recorder so as they all played melodeon, the only way to influence them was to learn it myself. One "ladies" team that I occasionally went along to play for was quite dissatisfying — a couple of the dancers found it likewise and we usually found ourselves in a wine-bar discussing the team after the practice. One of the people, Lynn, I found quite pleasant to be with, and we often found ourselves standing in the car park after the pub, but neither able to work out why or what to do. We eventually went to a festival for the day and at some point kissed on the way home. Within a month we were living together and soon married. A year after getting married, I noticed my arms and legs (especially my right arm) tended to hurt whilst dancing — I initially put it down to over-enthusiastic stick-hitting, but when it happened walking from the office I thought it worth popping in to my GP. Turned out that I had angina and I had an angioplasty to open up the blocked artery (the procedure had only just been invented). Although I could still dance, I tend to be risk-averse so moved exclusively to being a musician. I also took redundancy from my IT job and we moved to the Cotswolds. Our priority for location was first, good morris teams, then employment and third housing.

Twenty-seven years later, we're still married with two daughters. I was diagnosed with ASD last year and Lynn commented after the assessment that she would have answered all of the questions the same as I — but she has no desire for a formal diagnosis. Over recent years, as I've become aware of Autism/Asperger's, I've been surprised just how many morris dancers and musicians are Autistic. There's also a higher-than-average number of transgender people in morris, although most of these also seem to have had a diagnosis of ASD.

Having been a member over the years of twenty different teams, I now limit myself to playing two. *The outside capering crew* (www.caperingcr.eu) are a small team that specialise in entertaining, amusing and powerful dances — we tend to just dance at two or three folk festivals per year, but have performed in Dubai, USA and much of Europe.

My other team is fairly new — *Boss morris* (www.bossmorris.com) and made up of young female artists, designers and actors. This gives a very different team dynamic from most groups — very creative and performance-focused. The rehearsals happen to be half a mile from my home, but I'd happily travel a hundred miles to play for them. They appeal to a different (younger and trendy) audience, so as I type we've just returned from Glastonbury Festival and have WOMAD in a few weeks, have danced at the Barbican, the Royal Albert Hall, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, Port Eliot Festival and Soho Farmhouse. We had a full-page article in the *Sunday telegraph* this year, as well as appearng on the front pages of other newspapers. The dancers also perform and make videos with bands such as *Hot chip*, *Sweet baboo*, and have their own electronic music mixes for certain events.

I'm performing at gigs I'd never thought I'd play at. I find being a morris musician wonderful — I stand at the front of the dancers, absorbed in what they're doing and making the music fit them whilst my music makes them dance better. Again, I often find myself in a meditation-type state. I'm working with them, interacting, but not having to socialise deeply. The teams seem to accept me as a member but are not worried that I'm happy sitting on the sideline at the pub or being mostly quiet during team meals. Is morris the perfect hobby for Autistic people? I don't know — it has a lot of history and intellectual elements that can absorb you, yet is a team activity without a competitive nature. It certainly has worked for me. I'm happy to answer any questions!

Asperger's and mental health

by **Claire**

Let me introduce myself first. My name is Claire, I'm 28, and I have Asperger's syndrome (AS) and bipolar II disorder. I live in a flat I rent and get housing support. I also work part-time as a youth worker and have another job working with people with sensory impairments. I was only diagnosed with AS last September after the disability officer at the university I'm studying a post-graduate diploma at suggested that perhaps some of my problems were due to having AS. It was a bit of a battle to get assessed though. My current psychiatrist had no knowledge of AS and none of his colleagues knew much about it so I had to do my own research and give him details of the local assessment team which NAS kindly gave me. He phoned the team who agreed to assess me if he provided a background report, but it took him several months to do this because my mental health was very bad at the time, so he didn't want to refer me. Finally I got assessed in 2008.

Getting the diagnosis was a relief, at last I knew why I was how I was and could do something about it to help myself cope better in this confusing world. I wonder now if I could have been diagnosed sooner. Although I have been in the mental health system since I was 15, because the main concern was the severe depression and anxiety I was suffering from, all other problems were ignored. As a teen the adolescent psychiatrist did query my communication and social interaction skills but never referred me to his colleagues in speech therapy like he talked about doing. Perhaps, if it had been picked up, my mental health would not had suffered as much. High school was a nightmare for me as I struggled to fit in, was bullied because of my odd behaviours (not only by my peers but teachers also picked on me and made out I was stupid). High school is hard enough without having the added problem of not fitting in, being bullied, struggling to make friends and never understanding what was going on because of the lack of being able to understand non-verbal communication and non-spoken rules. The bullying and feelings of isolation and despair I endured throughout high school and university, and the depression it contributed to, led me to a very dark place. I was a vulnerable young adult living in a world I couldn't understand and with no-one to guide me through it.

My way of getting out all those pent up feelings and emotions that I couldn't express was through poetry. I found that although my communication skills were poor and I couldn't verbalise how I felt, given paper and pen I could let it all flow out. A couple of years ago I finally made my poetry public by self-publishing my poetry with funding from The Scottish Arts Council Fund and Young Scot. I'm selling my book, *From the depths of despair*, to raise awareness and to raise money for charity. For me, still, writing is the only way I can truly express all the anxiety and other emotions inside, because I lack the ability to verbalise it. As well as enjoying writing I also enjoy reading: reading is how I've come to understand what AS is and what it means for me.

I read a book recently about a woman with AS who was wrongly diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and what she wrote, I related to so much. I was diagnosed with BPD aged 20 but once the negative behaviours I was displaying were pointed out to me I was able to quickly work through things with the help of the mental health team just like the woman in the book. After reading the book I found many of the symptoms of BPD are similar to traits of AS or are problems affecting mental health due to having AS. I used to be part of an online support group for people with BPD but I never felt I fitted in and they are still battling with the same problems they have been for many years. It's like I always knew that the diagnosis wasn't right but then again I didn't know at the time what was wrong. I spoke to a friend recently who I'd not spoken to much lately but we've been friends for many years and she said that at least five years ago she'd suspected I had AS and had told me to push for assessment, but I can't remember it at all. She said that since she was a child she had an interest for neurodiverse conditions which is how she knew I had AS. She also knew from a long time ago that I didn't have BPD and I was on the bipolar spectrum. If only the professionals treating me had the same knowledge and awareness as she did, maybe then I would have got the correct diagnoses earlier on.

There is still much ignorance and lack of knowledge amongst mental health professionals about AS which may lead to people getting misdiagnosed or the possibility of them having AS overlooked. I do wonder how differently my life may have turned out had I known from an early age that I had AS. Would I have had a happier childhood, help and support with my education so I could have reached my potential instead of it being the worst years of my life? Would I have got more appropriate treatment for my mental health problems, and would I have been able to get help from autism specialists instead of me having to muddle through life trying to work out how to fit in and not stand out so much? I'll never know and I can't make the pain and depression I went through because of this go away, but at least now I have the knowledge to be able to make choices in my life with regards to work, education, and lifestyle that will not cause me as much anxiety, despair and depression, and knowledge is power.

Response to Andrew's alexithymia piece

by **Tony**

I can fully identify with Andrew's note-taking point, as my wife once threatened to throw my notebook out of the car window as we were driving along once (safe to say, she is not a great fan).

She also has annoyed the hell out of me in the past by continually asking me how I feel about things, "I don't know" seeming to be considered an inappropriate response. All this inane chit-chat about football, cars, sport and babies always has left me cold too.

People still find me weird but I have given up trying to fit in. Where I live now people don't stick their noses into other people's business and are polite, but keep themselves to themselves. This to me has been heaven.

I don't know if I have alexithymia, but it sure sounds like it. I have never had an official diagnosis of Autism either but at 67, who cares?

I am Haganfe the force of the whale
The whale is trying to find her purpose
Her purpose is hidden in the flick of her tail
Her tail is slowly bouncing in the ocean
The ocean is full of other live creatures
Creatures surrounding the whale's tail
The whale's tail showing the creatures something
Something's telling them that the whale is alive
Alive and living just like all the others
Others respect her now like she's one of the rest
Rest the night away for another day
Another day for the whale's tail to play

by **Kate**

The life and times of Cannon and Ball

by **Billy**

One of my specialist interests is comedy. I recently went to see the comedy duo Cannon and Ball in Northallerton. Actually, I've been to see them several times and this has inspired me to write my article . . ..

Tommy Cannon and Bobby Ball were, and still are, a successful British comedy double act. They met on a factory floor in Oldham in the early 1960s when they were working as welders.

At the time, Bobby was performing in the pubs and clubs as a singer in the evenings. Tommy would often go to watch him and had previously taken singing lessons.

Soon, Bobby and Tommy teamed up with a colleague of theirs called Stan Moores to form the Stan Moores Trio and they began to tour the pubs and clubs.

After a while, though, Stan decided to quit due to homesickness, so Bobby and Tommy decided to carry on singing as a duo.

They went through many different names: The Shirrell Brothers, The Harper Brothers and even Bobby and Stevie Rhythm.

Neither of them had any intention of doing comedy at all, but that all changed when Cannon and Ball found out that a comedian on the same bill as them had been paid more money.

From that day forward, they decided to work as a comedy duo and they never looked back.

At first, the act was very conventional: they both wore mohair suits and their act mainly consisted of comic patter between them.

Many comedy duos were working this way at the time, so they decided they had to be original.

Eventually, they hit upon an idea that worked: Tommy would come on as a suave nightclub singer and Bobby would interrupt him by barging through the audience and onto the stage as an autograph hunter in a baggy-pants tuxedo with red braces and the comic dialogue between them would start from there.

As for Bobby's famous catchphrase, that came about when Bobby heard Tommy singing the song *Rock on* by David Essex.

After hearing Tommy sing this, Bobby said, "Rock on, Tommy!" and the rest, as they say, is history.

As the act evolved, Cannon and Ball gradually started to move away from the star-versus-autograph-hunter angle and developed a unique comedy double act that was based on the characters that they had created: Tommy was the suave, but frustrated, showman who was always bullying Bobby, who was the exciteable, knockabout clown who would pick fights with the audience and generally mess about.

A key aspect of their act would involve Tommy grabbing Bobby by his braces and shouting at him and Bobby would pretend to get upset.

This was all part of the act, of course, but at first, some people didn't realise this. After one performance, Tommy got hit by a group of handbag-wielding old ladies. As Tommy and Bobby continued to improve their act, they slowly made the transition from working men's clubs and pubs to the cabaret clubs and theatres.

In 1969, they auditioned for the very popular TV talent show, *Opportunity knocks*, hosted by the then-very-famous Hughie Green, but unfortunately, they came last.

However, in 1974, they appeared on a TV variety show called *The wheeltappers' and shunters' social club*, and that was the first stepping stone to television success.

In 1978, Cannon and Ball were booked to record some comedy sketches for Bruce Forsyth's *Big night out* on ITV, but unfortunately, there was a technical strike and the sketches were never shown.

Because of this, the newspapers referred to them as "Cannon and Blackout". In 1979, London Weekend Television gave them their own television series and that was when they started to become a success.

The show got huge viewing figures every Saturday night and by the mid 1980s, they were huge stars, but fame had gone to their heads and things were starting to get out of hand.

Bobby suffered from the pressures of fame the most: It fed his ego so much that he began to drift into adultery and alcoholism.

This put a huge strain on his marriage and not only that, but it began to affect his relationship with Tommy.

During this time, Tommy and Bobby had separate dressing rooms and would travel separately. The only time they would speak to each other was when they were on stage doing their act.

Fortunately, Bobby found a resolution to his problems that would change his life forever: during his struggles, he became friends with a vicar called Max Wigley who would talk to him about God and the teachings of Christianity.

This inspired Bobby to convert to the Christian faith, stay off the alcohol and mend his marriage. It also inspired him to mend his friendship with Tommy, who, after a while, decided to become a Christian himself.

In 1988, *The Cannon and Ball show* ended, after nine years.

In the early 1990s, Tommy and Bobby tried to move into comedy acting with a series of sitcom pilots. Out of this series came the sitcom *Plaza patrol*, which ran for one series in 1991. The sitcom saw Tommy and Bobby play two security guards who work at *The Margaret Thatcher plaza* shopping centre.

As well as doing comedy acting, Cannon and Ball had had a go at hosting a gameshow called *Cannon and Ball's casino* the year before, which also ran for one series.

Realising that their television careers were over and that they were falling into tax problems, they carried on doing live performances to keep the money coming in and are still performing live today.

However, they have made occasional guest appearances on television, and despite the failure of *Plaza patrol*, Bobby Ball decided to carry on being a comedy actor as well as performing with Tommy Cannon.

More recently, he's appeared in the sitcom *Not going out* with the comedian Lee Mack.

Tommy, on the other hand, likes to take things easy when he's not performing and regularly enjoys playing golf.

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for January will be **sensory sensitivity, sensory stimulation (including stimming) and all aspects of our sensory experiences**. Vote with your contributions: the more submissions on a subject sent in (from different people) the more likely that that subject will be the theme. Writing on any subject is still welcome as are ideas for new themes, and artwork. Remember, if you want to see different content in *the Spectrum*, the best way to change it is to send something in!

The real Energizer rabbit

by **Christopher**

As a child, growing up in the late 1980s, I suppose if you were to file my behaviour, you would have filed me under the odd categories.

As a child, who sported a chubby, cute face, I recall I was transfixed with how train gates worked, that I would often use my mum's washing line in the garden of our semi-detached home to form my own set of gates, using the shiny gold washing line, that was to be used to prop our washing up, when Mum was airing our washing in the sunshine. I would imitate the noise the gates made while tearing around the garden on my silver little bike that sported little blue stabilisers.

Ironically the stabilisers never served the correct purpose, because one day while I raced around to our corner shop, I hit a bump in the road — where an old oak tree once stood, before it was chopped down. Upon hitting the bump, I catapulted over my silver handlebars and face planted the black, freshly laid tarmac. I was left with a big black patch of tarmac on my forehead and one cracked, very sore, broken front tooth, but even after several trips to our local dentist in our home town of Spalding, I recall that I still used to fill my spare time with racing around our garden on my bike, while playing with my own version of the gates.

Today, as an adult I recall vividly the Energizer-rabbit advert that used to feature on our coloured TV, back in 1988.

It was the advert of a pink mechanical toy rabbit that often banged a pink drum. The advert acted as a marketing tool to show how good the batteries were at supplying energy to children's toys, in order to keep them going and going and going and going. But I often saw myself as the rabbit, because my energy would often keep me going and going long into the day. The one difference between me and that toy bunny was I had no off switch.

Ironically, as a baby I was very nocturnal and would sleep all day and come out to play at night. Today I often ask myself the question: was I a vampire who was afraid of sunlight?

One hot summer's day, after I had been tearing around on my bike — and while Mum had been pegging out the washing — I had discovered what happened to a carpet after it had an entire bottle of bleach poured over it.

On another occasion, I turned three rings on on our family cooker and climbed up on the cooker and sat on the hobs. Luckily the ring I was sat on was the one I had forgot to turn on.

Yes folks, I was one bundle of pure mischief, but what set me apart from the other naughty kids was my ability to get out of trouble by flashing a cheeky smile of all teeth and cute little dimples. Well, I will rephrase that: a lot of cute teeth and one broken front tooth. But did Mum get to the bottom of why my behaviour was so odd? Well folks, you will find all this out in the next article.

Thanks for reading and bye for now.

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 NAS and readers' subscriptions, and is independent of the NAS. Although it was called "*Asperger United*" it aims to be for the whole of the (reading) autism spectrum. That is, the concerns and joys of any autistic subscriber can be printed, not just Asperger's.

2) *The Spectrum* is quarterly, published in January, April, July and October. If you do not receive a copy when you expect to, please contact the magazine.

3) Pieces that appear in *the Spectrum* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests something different. This is done to protect your privacy.

4) *The Spectrum* administers the copyright of everything that appears and it does this on behalf of the authors.

5) The NAS plans to expand *the Spectrum*'s presence on social media, so if you don't want your contribution used in this way, please make that clear when you submit it.

6) The NAS would like to keep in touch with you about NAS services, support, events, campaigns and fundraising. If you want to hear from the NAS, you can opt in to this on the NAS website. The NAS will only contact you in the ways you want.

7) 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.

8) You do not have to be a member of the NAS to subscribe to *the Spectrum*.

9) If you phone and leave a message on the machine, please speak slowly and clearly and spell uncommon words, as the line isn't very clear. Please give any phone number you leave twice for the same reason. Remember to give your postal address so that we can find your record.

10) You can sign up for an email notifying you whenever a new edition of *the Spectrum* is posted on the webpage above. Email
the.Spectrum@nas.org.uk
asking for the notification by email and please include your full name, postcode and let us know whether you want to subscribe to the the paid paper edition too.

11) If you want to unsubscribe from the paper version, inform *the Spectrum* and include your postal address. Or to unsubscribe from the email notification, include your email address.

12) 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) or email address (for the email notification).

13) 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. Also, they do not have to be short (the Goth keeps most of his reviews short to leave more space for other writers). If you do not want your review to appear in other NAS publicity about that book, please make this clear.

14) Although each issue is themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the letters and articles will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel, and for fitting the space available.

The Spectrum
magazine

National
Autistic
Society

Dr Phil van Neuter

from the Muppets

by **Cassidy**

Well, guys, it's October! and we all know what that means, right? Halloween! Which brings me to a subject that is near and dear to my heart: Dr Phil van Neuter from the Muppets!

Okay, so a little backstory about him: he debuted on the show, *Muppets tonight!* in 1996, and it aired until 1998. He is the host of a recurring sketch called *Tales from the vet*, which is obviously a spoof of *Tales from the crypt*. There, he tells horror stories of animals (like Taylor, the turkey who loved Thanksgiving, and Percy the ham-eating pig).

He has a wife named Composta Heap, who is his assistant, Mulch's sister.

So, after *Muppets tonight*! ended, he was the brain surgeon on *Muppets from space* who tried to suck Gonzo's brain out. He also appeared at the *Muppetfest* fan convention, where he had his only conversation with Dr Bunsen Honeydew. He also appeared in an episode of the game show, *Family friend*, where he and the four other muppets took on the Dixie Chicks, Keith Urban and Buck Owens — all country-music stars.

In a nutshell, I always loved Dr Phil van Neuter since his debut. This was when I was two or three years old. I remember my mom singing *She blinded me with science* while she was giving me my bath.

Call me crazy, but I think he is hot, sexy, dreamy, handsome, funny, smart and a little bit charming.

I know, I know, I have a huge crush and obsession with a fictional character. Haven't we all, though, at one point?

The Spectrum, c/o The NAS, 393 City Road, London EC1V 1NG
Telephone: **0808 800 1050** (free from most landlines) or
Telephone: **020 7923 5779** (geographical charges apply)
Email: **the.spectrum@nas.org.uk**
Website: **www.autism.org.uk/thespectrum**