**What does autism mean to me?**

I didn’t realise I was autistic for a long time. It wasn’t until I was 18 when things started to make sense as I started looking into it more. Before then, if you’d have asked me what I thought autism was, I would not have been able to answer. I had no clue what autism was. But as I started to learn more about it, things started to make sense, and eventually I realised it was me.

As a kid, I was simply labelled as shy, quiet, and perhaps a bit “quirky”. Things were easier as a kid because the social rules are less complicated for kids. Playing isn’t complicated. It was when we grew up, and playing turned into chatting, actual socialising, things started getting harder.

Moving up to secondary school saw a big change in me. I went from having been with the same small group of people for 6 or 7 years, to being in a much bigger school, with many more people, and hardly any that I knew. I wasn’t exactly equipped for this. I did the best I could to make friends, but it definitely took time, and it was quickly established that I definitely wasn’t going to be part of the popular clique. I was part of the weird kids clique. I was fine with that. After a year or two I finally settled and found good friends.

Aside from being a bit invisible, I got through secondary school fine. I had my small group of friends. I was fine.

But then came college. I was separated from my friends, off in the wild again to make more. Only this time, we’re teenagers, young adults. Socialising is even more complicated now. I had to try and force myself to talk to people, even though my mouth would seem to freeze up, my brain going blank as I tried to think up some conversation topic to talk about with a stranger.

College was isolating, to say the least. I spent a lot of time alone. I felt even more like a ghost. I was watching everyone else grow up and become adults, while I still felt stuck at 16.

Then I started seeing more stuff about autism online. I looked into it, and things seemed to fall into place. Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t a sudden lightbulb moment. It was a slow realisation, involving a lot of research and self-reflection. But I can safely say that as soon as I realised that this was the best word to describe all the things I’d experienced all this time, things got better. I went from feeling intensely lonely, isolated, invisible, to feeling seen and heard, and happy.

So, autism means a lot to me.

I would define autism as a disorder that effects communication, sensory processing and structure and routine. Autism is a spectrum. This is a well-known fact, but a lot of people misconstrue what this spectrum actually looks like. It’s not a linear spectrum from “not autistic” to “very autistic”. There’s no such thing. A better way to think of it is like a colour wheel. Every colour is a different aspect of autism, and we all have our unique colour palate.

I personally like to think of autism like a sound mixing board. It’s full of switches, sliders, dials, each of which corresponds to a different trait of autism. Every autistic person will have their own unique set up on this sound board. For some, they might be much more impacted by the sensory aspect, and struggle greatly with loud sounds or bright lights, but they’ll be less impacted by the communication aspect, and won’t find it as hard to talk to people and communicate with others, while another autistic person might be greatly impacted by the communication aspect – they might be non-verbal, and struggle to connect with other people, but aren’t very impacted by sensory processing differences or routine. Every autistic person is different, but we’re all autistic. We’re not more or less autistic, we’re just autistic. Just because our struggles might not be as visible, does not mean we don’t still struggle.

**What I wish people knew about Autism**

I wish people knew that autistic people are not objects to be laughed at, to be the butt of your jokes. We’re people just like everyone else is. And yes, we see those jokes, we understand that they’re jokes.

I wish people understood that Autism doesn’t mean that we’re children. It doesn’t mean that we’re clueless. It doesn’t mean that you have to treat us differently or speak to us differently. There’s nothing more patronising than being spoken to like a child. I’m 21 years old. I don’t need to be treated like a child.

I wish people understood that, majority of the time, we do *want* to socialise, to make friends, to hang out with people. While we may avoid some of the usual environments used for socialisation, that doesn’t mean we don’t want to do it at all. And it wouldn’t hurt to invite us. It’s painful and isolating when I see people around me hanging out and socialising when I wasn’t even offered an invite. Yes, I probably wouldn’t choose to come, but it would be nice to at least be considered. It’s not difficult to socialise with us if you know how. Just sit with us, talk with us. Watch our favourite shows or movies with us. Ask us about our sensory needs and preferences so we can find the best and most accommodating places to go and things to do. If you give us the opportunity, we can be just as fun to hang out and socialise with. We may do things a little different, or struggle with certain things, but that doesn’t mean you have to give up all together.

Most of the friends I’ve made in my life, were the people who didn’t give up. The people who didn’t give up when I didn’t say much in conversations. The ones who kept talking and just let me listen. With some persistence, you soon get more out of me.

My closest friends are the friends I’ve made online. I find writing so much easier than speaking out loud (hence why I’m a writer. I feel I can better express my experiences through written word than spoken.), and so it’s much easier for me to connect to people who I can just have text conversations with. I’m eternally grateful that I was able to find these friends.

I wish people knew that autism isn’t some big scary word. It’s not some serious disease. It’s simply a different neurotype. A different way of seeing the world. It’s not scary, I promise.

I wish people understood that we’re not all young, cis, white boys who are geniuses. We’re not Rain Man. We’re not Sheldon Cooper, we’re not Shaun from *Good Doctor* or Sam from *Atypical*. We’re people, everywhere on the gender spectrum, the sexuality spectrum, of all ages and races and identities. We’re people like you. And there’s no way to “look” autistic. It’s not written in bold on our foreheads for all to see.

I wish people knew that sometimes, autism hides. You could know someone who’s autistic, and not know. Because again, there’s no physical way to define autism. We don’t have a “look”, and while for some it may appear more obvious based off our mannerisms, many autistic people learn to mask these mannerisms, and appear “normal”. Personally, it’s not something I’m very good at, but for a lot of autistic people, it’s a defence mechanism. They know the only way they can survive in this world is to push it all down, put on a mask, and pretend to be someone they’re not. They have to think consciously about every single movement, every facial expression, every word they say. They have to force themselves to look people in the eyes, no matter how much it hurts. It’s the only way people will accept them, in some cases, it’s the only way to avoid getting hurt, or in serious danger. And it’s all because allistics (non-autistics), see our mannerisms, and immediately see us as a target. They see that we’re different, that we’re weird, that we’re not normal, and we unnerve them. They may even perceive us as danger. This is why so many autistic people have no choice but to mask.

**What are the positives of autism**

I love that my autism causes me to find intense joy in small things. What allistics may find to be just a small thing that makes them happy for a moment, can overwhelm me with joy, and make my entire day. Simple things, like pretty sunsets, perfect looking clouds, bonding with animals, that one moment in a song that hits just right, can bring such joy. I may notice small things that Allistics might not. Allistics might look straight ahead while walking, but I look up at the sky, the way the birds fly by, the clouds in the sky, or I look down at the ground, seeing every crack in the ground, every blade of grass, every flower, every small insect. I notice all these small things, and all of them bring me joy.

I love that my autism causes me to be so very passionate about things. Special interests are things that autistic people are so deeply interested in that they become a fundamental part of their personality. We often use our special interests to navigate the world around us, and they help us bond with the people around us. I’ve found friends through shared interests of K-pop and Korean culture. Ironically, Autism itself is one of my special interests, which is why I’m so passionate about sharing my experience with it, and helping others learn and understand more about it.

Autistic people can have all sorts of special interests: Animals, science, maths, language, music, tv shows, movies, history, cultures, psychology, sports, medicine. The list is endless.

I love that my autism helps me to be kind to people and empathise. It’s a common misconception that all autistic people lack empathy. While some do, for many, it’s quite the opposite. We’re incredibly empathetic, so much so we feel empathy for inanimate objects. The emotions can be so overwhelming. It’s just sometimes, we’re not sure what to do with these feelings, we’re not sure how to help or express our empathy. I can feel other people’s emotions as if they were my own, it’s just sometimes, I’m not sure how to express it.

Autism can also create a strong sense of justice, and so I care strongly about making sure everyone is heard, and that no one is treated unjustly. I’m very passionate about human rights.

**What are the negatives of Autism**

While there are good sides to autism, there are also downsides. It is a disability, after all. It’s not a “different ability” or “superpower”, and frankly I find it diminishing and patronising for it to be called that, personally.

Autism can be incredibly isolating. For many of us, we’re stuck inside our own minds, and we can’t always express all the things we feel, even to those we trust the most. And when people notice our differences, they avoid us, and so we end up being left out, alone, on the fringes of society.

Approximately 22% of autistic adults in the UK are employed. That leaves 78% of us who are unemployed. Employment can be really difficult for autistic people. Getting a job in the first place is incredibly difficult, having to navigate a whole new world with specific language. Even Allistics have to put on a persona in interviews, but for autistic people, we have to try even harder in order to sell ourselves. We have to mask as much as possible, force ourselves to make eye contact, because no matter how much it hurts, that is what is “professional”. But we also have to think very consciously to make sure we’re not making too much eye contact, because that’s not professional, and we also have to think consciously about our body language, facial expressions, all while also having to answer often confusing and complicated questions. We can’t answer bluntly like we want to, because that wouldn’t be seen as professional, so we have to do our best to script our answers beforehand, and just hope that we don’t get a question we aren’t prepared for.

It’s incredibly exhausting, and also very anxiety-inducing, at least for me. And it feels like a waste of energy if we then get denied. That’s how it’s been for me. I had been trying to get a part-time job for a long time, but I’ve still never had any sort of employment, at 21 years old.

And for those who do manage to get past that stage and get a job, many autistic people struggle to stay in jobs that don’t accommodate for their needs. Some jobs can be very overwhelming sensory-wise, or involve lots of socialising, which can be exhausting. And then for a lot of people, employers fail to accommodate for these things. This then leads people into states of burnout, where they simply can’t handle working anymore, and have to quit.

A lot of the things that make autism so hard, are due to society being ignorant and unaccommodating. People don’t know much about autism, other than what they’re fed through the media, which often isn’t correct or is a very narrow view of what autism really is. Because of this, we don’t get the accommodations we need, and struggle to connect to others when they’re not aware of how to best interact with us.

**My message to other autistic people**

Autism is not easy. Autism sucks, sometimes. But also, it is who we are. It’s how we see the world and I think that sometimes, despite the bad, it is beautiful.

I want other autistic people to know that you’re ok just the way you are. I wish I could say you don’t need to change for others, but unfortunately in this world, a lot of the time it’s the only way we can survive. But if you get tired, and can’t continue to mask anymore, that’s ok. It’s ok to take a break.

I hope you never feel like you’re too much for other people. Having special interests and being passionate is something to be so very proud of.

You’re allowed to be proud to be autistic.