

"Ever Wonder Why You're So Different?" by Kate Goldfield

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Ever Wonder Why You're So Different?

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When I was a freshman in college, someone asked a friend of mine if I was autistic. Having almost no knowledge about what autism was other than a dim memory of a Rain Man- like character rocking in the corner and nonverbal, I was appalled. How could anyone possibly think I was like that?

Two years later, I rediscovered the subject of autism after seeing a Lifetime movie about it. I was intrigued by some of the concepts in it and began reading everything I could find about autism, purely out of intellectual interest.

I awakened to the notion that a lot of what I was reading sounded like me. I learned that autism is actually a spectrum disorder, which means that there are people who are affected by it on different levels. I discovered something called Asperger's Syndrome, which is high-functioning autism and markedly different in its presentation than what we could call classic autism.

People with Asperger's Syndrome, or AS, I learned, have trouble reading social cues and understanding nonverbal language. They have trouble knowing what to say in conversations, when to start speaking and when to stop speaking. They fail to notice subtle conversational cues like change in tone of voice or body posture. In fact, they have trouble with social language in general.

They are often highly intelligent, especially with special interests that they pursue, but have trouble conversing. Because of this, they have trouble making friends and many will go through all of high school and college without having ever really made a good friend.

Sensory issues are very prevalent in people with AS. They can hear the sound of a person tapping their pencil from across the room. The smell of cigarette smoke or cleaning agents will drive them crazy. Lights are either too bright or too dim and they often have a difficult time finding clothes that they can bear wearing because of the way they feel on their skin. Often, they will have "sensory overloads" and need some time out from an activity to process all that is happening to them.

For this reason, eye contact can hurt. Social interactions for someone with AS can be like trying to put together a 500-piece puzzle before the time is up. We even speak differently; our conversational manner tends to be quite genuine. We say what we're thinking.

It is this genuineness, though, that endears us to many people. We don't play guessing games with people; we say what we mean. As employees and friends, we are loyal. We have the ability to focus completely on tasks of interest for hours at a time and also to remember huge amounts of facts related to our interests quite easily.

When I was diagnosed with AS last summer, it came as an enormous relief. I finally knew why I had always hovered on the outside of social life, always wanting to join in but somehow never being able to figure out quite how. I could find other people who understood me and were like me.

Unfortunately, so many people are not as fortunate as I was to gain this understanding about myself. There is comparatively little information available about AS. It was put into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders (the official handbook of what is and what is not a psychological disorder) in 1994. There are so many people out there who wonder why they are different, who are desperate to find the missing piece but have never even heard of AS.

I explain all of this just to give the average person an idea of what it is like to live on the autistic spectrum. I feel that it is only by learning about each other's struggles and truly trying to understand them that we can build a world that is safe for everyone - a world where we can grow and improve because we are taking advantage of everyone's strengths, not just the strengths of a selective few. That's the kind of world I want to live in. It's the kind of world we all want to live in.

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