

COLLECTION

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PENFRIEND PROJECT

THE AUTISM BYLINE





GEEK CLUB BOOKS

Words. Creative expression. Thought-provoking essays. Personal points of view. The Penfriend Project helps us experience 'autism' through a writer's own personal narrative about being autistic. When we read these stories, we discover that there are more similarities between us than differences.

Seeking insights into your child's world? These writers will give you a deeper understanding about life on the spectrum. Their unique 'voices' are powerful, uplifting and are changing the world's view of autism.

Enjoy COLLECTION

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Joel Murphy

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I AM Awesome

By Lydia Wayman

I am awesome... not despite my autism but precisely because of it.

I haven't always been able to celebrate my differences. In elementary school, the other kids teased me about my tics. As I got older, I developed with increasing difference from my peers, and by the time I was 16, I didn't have a single friend in a high school of 2000 kids. I combined my junior and senior years into one, which meant that I had so much homework that I didn't have time to care about not having friends. I didn't go to my senior prom. By my senior year in a small, private, elite college, I had a 3.90 GPA, no real friends, and a huge fear of professors after having rubbed too many of them the wrong way.

I was 20 years old and a senior when I joined the color guard for marching band, one of my only extracurricular activities. Quickly, I connected to Leigh, a junior and psychology major. She soon realized that I struggled to get along with the other girls and thought maybe I could use a friend, not out of pity, but a true good heart.

Over the next weeks, she picked up on my quirks... differences not just in the way I relate to other people but also in the way I communicated (I struggle verbally but type very well) and my narrow, intense interests. The "magic triad" must have rung a bell in Leigh's head; she had done a lengthy paper on the autism spectrum and, even though every teacher and professional had missed it up to that point, she knew what was in front of her.

I was diagnosed in January of 2009, and the three years that followed my diagnosis were chock full of difficulties. I was not able to complete my student teaching assignment; I was so overwhelmed by the social and communication and sensory demands that I became physically sick. My grandmother, who made my world go 'round, passed away during that semester. Upon graduating, I returned home and intensely regressed. I had spent 21 years forcing my square-peg, autistic self into round, neurotypical holes, and I

reached a point that I could not do it one more day. I withdrew, hardly spoke for almost two years, and had daily meltdowns resulting from a world that was simply too much.

I had extensive services for the next two years. I had therapy of many kinds, over a dozen different medications, and social groups. But, none of those things brought me to a point of being able to function. If anything, they made things worse. The big ticket, the key to being a happy autistic person... is allowing myself to be autistic. My neurology is different; if I force myself to try to live like an NT, then I won't be a happy NT but a miserable autistic person, which is exactly what I was at my low point. As I began to allow myself to accommodate for my own needs, whether that meant

"AUTISM ISN'T WHAT MADE MY LIFE SO HARD AT TIMES...IT WAS LIVING IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T MADE FOR ME."

having a fidget in my backpack, never wearing pants with buttons and zippers, typing to communicate when necessary, carrying transition items, or chilling out with Disney movies because I so happen to really enjoy them, I had to lose the obsessive worry about what "they" will think and do the things and live the life that allowed me to be a happy me and not a fake version of some other person, someone I don't even recognize.

Autism isn't what made my life so hard at times...it was living in a world that isn't made for me. I also refuse to say that my life is harder than anyone else's—it's just hard in a different way. There are things, from writing poetry to being true to myself to standing under peer pressure, that are tough for most NTs but easy for me because of my autism.

I have learned to use aspects of my autism in ways that allow me to excel in what I do. Through my writing and speaking, I teach parents and professionals about living with autism. I have written two books and vari-

"I ALSO REFUSE TO SAY THAT MY LIFE IS HARDER THAN ANYONE ELSE'S—IT'S JUST HARD IN A DIFFERENT WAY"

ous articles. I may have a hard time speaking freely, but I can write my presentations in advance then read them to my audiences. I enjoy consulting for families, helping them to problem-solve and decode their kids' behavior for them. I am doing very well in a graduate program for English and creative writing; I am on track to graduate in November and, as of now, I have a 4.00 average. It is because of autism that I have an incredible command of grammar and unique stories and insights to share with the world. I hope to use my Master's degree to become an online adjunct professor, where my autism will give me an understanding for all types of learners and the unique ability to adapt my instruction to suit their needs.

I live a different kind of life, but, shouldn't I expect that, since I have a different kind of brain? My neurology makes some things harder; that's okay, because it's true of any kind of brain wiring. My wiring also makes some things easier, and so does yours. The important thing is that we all have a place in this world; we all belong; we're all awesome, not despite our differences... but precisely because of them.



Just Imagine

By Chloe Rothschild

Just imagine having so much to say and not always being able to express it.
Just imagine having so much to share with the world but not always knowing how.
Just imagine being upset, sad, scared, and not always having the words and ability to describe it in a way others can understand.
Just imagine this being a small piece of your world.
Just imagine the effort it takes each and every single time.
Just imagine, how hard it is to hurt, yet not be able to articulate what exactly hurts and how it feels.
Just imagine what it's like to feel happy, to feel pure joy, at even the simplest of things.
Just imagine a smile and a laugh that can brighten a room.
Just imagine having so many people who love you, care about you and want what's best for you.
Just imagine having a group of people who support you, encourage you and would do pretty much anything for you.
Just imagine, a young lady who works hard, and tries her best, even when it can be hard.
Just imagine a young lady who loves to think about how far she's come.
Just imagine a young lady who's therapists, friends and parents tell her she amazes them and makes them proud.
Just imagine a world where even the littlest of things is a really big deal.
Just imagine a world where even the "small", yet not-so-small-at-all accomplishments are celebrated.
Just imagine being a part of my world, it's not always easy, but it's definitely worth it.





Today I Threw a Carrot Cake

By Emma Dalmayne

Today I threw a carrot cake. Luckily it was in its box so it was ok. It was a rough week.

Early this morning my eldest son went to ask for an autism assessment, the GP declined which means I have to go down there with him and attempt to explain to the doctor what my son was not able to communicate.

My daughter had terrible anxiety and vomited as she started her induction week at college today.

I asked the local family support library for permission to film an upcoming news interview on their premises. They said no, even though it's to try and stop an inhumane treatment of autistic children and even though I would not disclose that I was at their location on camera.

I also asked the local National Autistic Society for a quote or for them to come on with me, and their response?

"I believe you would be the best person to do that Emma." So no support as usual today from organizations locally.

My son trashed my room again which normally would not annoy me but today...It had me counting through gritted teeth. I'm packing teddies away trying to clear the floor to hoover it and he's taking them out as I'm putting them in.

So I leave the room and breathe in the hall till he comes out to ask for carrot cake. He has great taste in cake.

I say "no not right now I have to sort dinner out."

"Then can I have carrot cake?"

"Yes now stop asking."

He asks again, and I am now on the brink of tears...a meltdown slowly making its way.

"Stop, I say you know what's happening to me, it happens to you so just walk away a minute, please?!"

I am getting slowly more wound up like a snake uncoiling. I go into the kitchen and he comes in again to ask for cake, so I give in for a quiet life and allow a small slice before dinner.

"Is that all?!" he asks looking at the slice?

"Yes it is you will get another little slice after dinner."

He protests loudly and I get the box of cake and send it careening straight down the stairs...then scream. My son looks at me then picks up his slice of cake and takes a bite, tuts and walks out into the front room to watch Jake and the Neverland Pirates.

I then heave the recycling down the stairs and have a good cry. I feel like the world is ending, no one cares and oh! My poor cake!! I race down the stairs nearly tripping to broken ankle with my new culottes on and my cake is, mercifully intact.

I have great taste in cake.

Tidy up the recycling and drying my tears, I take the cake back upstairs. I run my wrists under cool water to calm and regulate myself then put some sausages on for the children's dinner.

"Can I have my other slice of cake yet?!" shouts a little voice from the front room.

Sometimes you have to laugh, so I do. Being a mother and being autistic has its ups and downs, but it gives me an edge, I believe, on tolerance. You see as I know what it feels like to have a meltdown and I would never judge my autistic children for having one. I leave them alone till they feel they are no longer drowning, and I would respect that if they explode over a slice of cake it's not the cake that caused it.

It's a build up of things, the bottle of pop was already shaken, and the cake unscrewed the lid.



“BEING A MOTHER AND
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What Happens When They Refuse to Accept?

By Megan Amodeo

Acceptance, belonging, acknowledgement, these are all words every human being wants to hear in her lifetime. To be a part of something. To belong to a group. To have an identity that others understand. To be embraced. Let's face it, we all need to know that people our friends, families, coworkers accept us.

No one wants to be an outcast. No one wants to volunteer to sit on the sidelines of life.

Unfortunately, for many people, that is exactly the way things happen. Prince Charming doesn't save the day, lost pets aren't always found, and people with differences aren't always accepted.

In the world today, it seems everyone is different. People are different races, religions, ethnicities, genders, and colors. There are people with disabilities. There are physical disabilities, neurological disabilities, mental and emotional disabilities. Some disabilities are obvious and some not so much.

Autism spectrum disorders often fall into the invisible disabilities category. You can't see autism.

Sure we (autistics) do have some distinct characteristics, but even those are not always apparent to outsiders. I, myself can seamlessly blend into society. I don't stand out in a crowd.

But what happens when people know that you are on the spectrum and they refuse to accept and acknowledge your challenges? It seems as if I've always known that I was different. I never seemed to quite fit into the social mold that society presented. As early as first grade, I can remember not understanding group games and playground nonsense.

As I grew older, social interactions became increasingly frustrating. By late junior high school, I was thoroughly confused. Why were people using slang words that made no sense? How were the girls in my class getting dates. What was flirting? Why do my peers move in

and out of social situations so easily? Why didn't I get the memo? Was there a class I forgot to take? High school and college became my worst social nightmares. I never felt sorry for myself, but I was perpetually frustrated. I was awkward!

In my case, I was not diagnosed with autism until my mid-thirties. Since I had no idea why social situations were so demanding, I resigned myself to swim with rest of the fish as best as I could. The problem was I was a guppy in a shark tank. Things might have been somewhat easier for me if I had had a supportive network of friends or family members. Unfortunately, my parents moved twice during my school career. As a result I went to two different junior high schools and two different high schools. In my opinion, if it can at all be avoided, never move a child on the spectrum during her formative junior high or high school years. As a result, I never really felt accepted by any specific friend group because I never stayed in one place long enough.

High school was incredibly socially challenging because my parents moved my sophomore year of high school to a small farming community. Needless to say I was an outsider. Most of the students in my class had been together since kindergarten. My parents were less than supportive in my pursuit to fit in at school. I grew up in a verbally and emotionally abusive home. Being different not only isolated me from my peers, it isolated me from my family. So here's my earth shattering reveal, my family (specifically my parents) never accepted the person I truly know to be me.

Growing up in a house with parents that constantly frowned upon my "weird" behavior was, in a nutshell, miserable at best. My mother especially disliked my personality. My personality turns out to be autistic. Of course back in the dark ages, no one knew what Aspergers looked like. People like me (I know there were others.) were considered to be oddballs, geeks, nerds, rigid...the list goes on. My mother desperately wanted me to fit in and be normal.

At one point she did take me to a therapist. Unfortunately, after consulting with my parents, everyone was convinced I had OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). The thing is, I didn't have OCD, one cannot medicate or wish away autism spectrum disorder. Much to my parents' dismay, my "weirdness" wouldn't/couldn't be changed, fixed, or deleted. I endured countless hours of criticism and ridicule. My parents constantly mocked my behavior, made jokes about me, and we're just plain mean. I guess they thought if they shamed and embarrassed me enough, I would be like all the other kids. I would stop "acting" so inappropriately (according to my parents' social views).

I am not telling this highly personal account of my life so that people will feel sorry for me. I am telling this story so that other parents can learn from my story. The most important thing you can do as a mom or dad is accept your children the way they are. I have lived a life knowing that I was not accepted by the people who were supposed to love me unconditionally. I will shout from the rooftops until the day I die, 'Love your children for who they are, not what you wish they were!'

You cannot fix or wish away what you perceive to be wrong with your child. Accept them wherever they are, whoever they are. Acceptance is possibly the greatest gift you can give your child. Children grow into adults. Adults choose their own paths. Give them wings so they'll fly back to you one day.

I will tell you that my parents, sadly, never did choose to accept me. I am a 42 year old orphan (with living parents). They refused to accept my differences, my wonderfully quirky personality. I am not bitter, I have three beautiful daughters (two of whom are just like their momma). I have a wonderful husband. I am happy being me. I live with being able to freely live life with autism. Autism is a bumpy ride, but aren't thrill rides the most exhilarating and exciting?



ACCEPTANCE

My Unenchanted Evening

By Richard Johnson Âû

The needs of our children don't let up. No matter where we are at emotionally, physically or whatever. One of my girls needed a lift to her weekly small group she attends so I gathered up my energy and motivation and headed out the door even though I was tired and a bit fragile. It was an unexpected disruption to my inner plan for the evening and the rest of the day. Trigger point one had been breached – Change of routine in unexpected ways.

This was particularly pertinent, I had already dealt with a few of these little changes throughout the day and was beginning to sense a level of anxiety rising within me. One of my other daughters is helping out a family around the block who is on holiday by collecting their post. She was in her pajamas already, but figured she could just duck out of the car and grab the mail and jump back in the car.

Out the door and into the soaking wet rain, jump in the car. Of course I was just doing a quick ten minute little trip so didn't worry about whether I had a jumper or even shoes, I threw on my rubber thongs (flip-flops for my American readers). Off we went, two Autistics and an Allistic. The traffic was all over the place considering the night and seemed determined to raise my levels of anxiety to disastrous. Cars in front stopping suddenly with stop lights not working, the rain on the windscreen playing havoc with visual processing and causing all kinds of difficult reflections. A police car two cars in front dropping a sudden u-turn and needing to brake very suddenly to avoid an accident.

My anxiety levels were rising pretty quickly. I had other things I would rather have been doing, but, I was doing what I should have been doing: what my kids needed me to do for them.

Another red light! Waiting. Off we go again. Up the hill. BANG! What the hell was that...
Flap flop. flap flop. Oh great. A blow out. No nice place to pull over, just a dirt edge, facing up hill, pouring with rain. Wearing jeans and a light shirt and thongs.

Stop take a deep breath. I really need to do this as I am feeling like I could easily just blow up right about now – Just like the tire did.

I duck out into the rain and check the tire. It couldn't be much flatter. What to do?

Two daughters in the car needing to be somewhere else. One dad in the car wanting to be somewhere else. Traffic blasting past in the two busy lanes. I have to deal with this, we ring the RACV (our local roadside assistance organization), after some discussion and discovery that details need to be updated as they are attached to the other vehicle that is sitting happily in the garage at home. A 40 – 70 minute wait.

More frustration.


By this time I am on something of a knife's edge. The 40-70 minutes became two hours. A tow truck turned up as the company deemed our position to be too hazardous for the roadside assistance person to assist. They made this call without actually telling me of course and suddenly everything had changed again.

I was really struggling to hold myself together. I was very angry that I was waiting and waiting, that there was minimal communication and left in a state of not knowing. These are things that I don't cope with very well at all. I managed to hold it together reasonably well in the end and I am actually chalking it up to a successful avoidance of a meltdown. I am somewhat pleased with myself.

The success here was not planned and is somewhat surprising really.

Situations like this have often been catalysts for me to crash into raging meltdowns where I become totally irrational and loud and end up in a curled up ball of quivering bawling human.

So I am really happy to have managed this process as I did. Surprised but happy. What was different here, I



“IT WAS NOT
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BUT IT WAS AN
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TRIUMPH.”

wonder, I can't put my finger on it completely but my line of thinking at this stage is that I managed to have some tiny level of awareness that I was a bit triggered, that I was moving into a difficult state of circumstances. I believe that was the number one thing.

The number two thing, and perhaps the most important and pivotal was in making contact and connection with the people I know that could support and help me and were available. I was able to make contact with my wife at home so there was not that worry, I was then able to engage in some social media activity with some contacts and maintain connection throughout the process. I think this made a huge difference for me. I think this was in fact a huge thing in this situation. So much so I managed to kill the battery of my phone to completely flat. Thankfully I saw this coming and was able to make appropriate contact with home base to let them know the situation.

The take away from all this I guess is that it is possible to head it off. Yes we can, sometimes at least, head off that meltdown or shutdown before it actually happens. First, and this is pretty critical, know what triggers you, learn the situations, feelings, thoughts, words that are likely to contribute to heading down that pathway. Second, and equally pivotal, is knowing who you can call on that will listen as you ramble and not dismiss you. Have a few people or groups you can do this with, just in case you can't contact the first person you try. It was not an evening of enchantment but it was an evening of triumph.



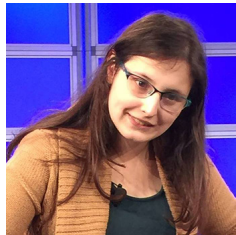
Meet the Writers



Megan Amodeo is a stay-at-home mom with 3 beautiful daughters, a workaholic husband and a very energetic Alaskan Klee Kai dog. Prior to her children, she was working in special education. She has two daughters with autism and one with ADHD. She is also on the autism spectrum. Megan wants to share her unique view of the world and be your source of hope.



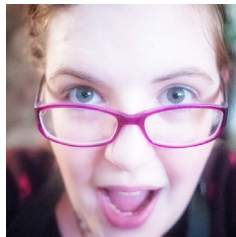
Emma Dalmayne is an autistic home educating mother from London who has children on the autism spectrum. She loves expressing herself through the written word, especially sharing her experiences and penning articles that help other families in the autism community. She enjoys multiple sensory play sessions with her children and is an avid campaigner against MMS and mistreatment of autistics.




Chloe Rothschild is 22 years old and has autism and a visual impairment. In addition to her autism advocacy, she is a popular presenter and writer. Chloe is on the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI) advisory board, managing editor of the Autism Research Institute's Adults with Autism eBulletin and a young leader for the Autistic Global Initiative.



Richard Johnson is an autistic father with three daughters, two of whom are autistic, living in Melbourne Australia. Richard strongly embraces the neurodiversity paradigm and advocates for the full acceptance and protection of autistics within society.



Lydia Wayman uses her personal experience and professional knowledge to help parents and professionals understand autism through her writing. Lydia is a devoted cat mom and proud aunt to the cutest baby in the world, as well as a caffeine and Disney addict. She believes that people are awesome, not despite their differences, but precisely because of them.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a lit sparkler. The hand is wearing a grey, textured knit sleeve. The sparkler is bright and glowing, with many sparks flying out. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue and white, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is celebratory and hopeful.

Geek Club Books tells the stories
of autism to ignite hearts and open
minds so every individual in this
world has an opportunity to shine.

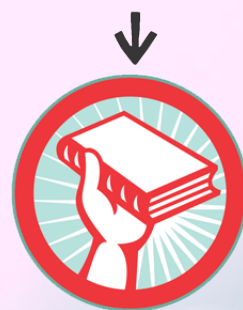
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