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Work and Education

EARLY EDUCATION, FOR ME, was not an easy time and I'm fairly sure a lot of people on the autism spectrum who went through high school had a similarly rough experience. I'm not going to focus on school life throughout, as I covered school life pretty extensively in *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome*. (Yes, that was a shameless plug.) What I am going to cover, however, is dealing with the fallout from a negative schooling experience. If you had a great school life, then that's wonderful. If you didn't, however, and if the experience was negative, it can leave lasting scars that can be detrimental to not just your future education, but your life from then on. By 'negative experience' I don't just mean that there were days when you were bored, or you didn't have fun, or you didn't feel like going in. I mean if there were days when the thought of getting up and going to school made you physically ill, where sometimes the anxiety got so bad that even the idea of it was enough to send you into a panic.

If the last sentence of the last paragraph resonated with you, then you have my commiserations – school wasn't a good time for you either. I went through a number of schools trying to

find a formula that worked for me, and ended up being home schooled after everything culminated in my taking an overdose and ending up in a coma. Every aspect of school was difficult for me and I couldn't find a way to make it work. The sounds were too loud and unexpected to cope with; every school bell was another shock to the system. The lights flickered and each day was a new headache. People there were less than understanding, and detention became a welcome respite from the schoolyard. It became a common side-effect of the fights I got into for being 'weird', my mere existence apparently a blight to certain people.

No person should be subject to constant psychological and physical duress on a daily basis – such an existence has no place in the civilised world. School life shouldn't be any different. I said I wasn't going to dwell on the subject of school, but if you're reading this and you're still in school, and this sounds like your school life, you need to tell someone, in any way you can. Talking about feelings was never easy for me; I find it easier to write them down – if this is easier for you, then you should do it. The present is not worth jeopardising the future for.

Emotions and habits attached to caustic situations and experiences don't just disappear as soon as those events finish, and this is very important to consider when dealing with the fallout from negative experiences post-school. For a very long time after I finished school, I was plagued by agoraphobia and anxiety, and a deep distrust in humanity. Throwing off that weight was a long process; some of the ways I dealt with it helped, some hindered. While I didn't undergo it myself, I've heard from a lot of people that CBT helps deal with some of the anxiety, and talking through with family members helped me a great deal. Part of getting better, and reclaiming some sense of normality after any detrimental experience, is finding your best route to recovery. Each person is different and it's important to find what works best for you; your past and people close to you are the best

ways to work this out. For me, gradual desensitisation worked best, challenging myself by putting myself into social situations to push me out of my comfort zone. There were too many times I pushed myself too far and ended up having a meltdown or a panic attack, and too many times when I didn't have an 'escape' when things got too much. If you want to challenge yourself and go down this route, then contingency planning is important – things can go wrong, situations can become too stressful and it's important to have an 'escape route' if they do.

While school itself can be difficult, so too can be time without it. A lack of structure can be problematic. It's important that you have something to do sometimes, as days where you have nothing to keep you company other than your own thoughts can be the worst. For me, the holidays were almost worse than school itself; all the anxiety that I'd harboured all through term time didn't just disappear as soon as the holidays began, and though the holidays heralded a reprieve from school life, they also meant days where there was no structure, nothing to distract me from my inner demons. I'm sure a lot of people reading this will agree that the mind can be a dark place and sometimes we are our own worst enemies.

Filling the days with something is important, whatever that is. If you get used to setting up a timetable early on, you'll find it much easier in later life. Lacking structure can leave you feeling lost and helpless, and often you find yourself filling the days with things that are less than constructive. Rudyard Kipling was right when he wrote in his poem 'If' that the common minute can be unforgiving and it can be hard to fill it with 'sixty seconds' worth of distance run'. We live in a world of distractions, both technological and otherwise, and it can be all too easy just to let time slip away. This isn't to say that you shouldn't have days where you let time just slip away – not at all. Often we need these 'defrag days' to get our thoughts in order. In the process

of academic writing, this is called 'incubation' – leaving time to think and organise your thought process into something coherent so you can put down your thoughts properly.

Further/higher education

We begin our journey into education with school. School is a strange place, full of unfamiliar faces and noises – we can learn some of them, but to learn them all broaches the realms of the impossible. It can be a difficult place for someone growing up with an autism spectrum disorder, and, by extension, for their siblings, parents and carers. Life in both further and higher education, however, is a strange place. In school we are taught facts and figures, and to some extent right from wrong. We are taught things which we assume to be right and we eschew that which isn't. After this, we graduate from secondary school and end up running into this big flashing neon sign that says, 'It's not quite as simple as that.' (It's not a literal sign by the way, just a metaphor. It still proves my point perfectly though, because even language is complex.) The first time I learned that some of my high school textbooks were wrong or outdated, it blew my mind. When we are young teenagers in secondary school, our teachers' words are gospel, so to find that we may have learned *wrong* information in school is just bizarre.

Obviously, while a portion of the information we take in is subjective, this is not to say that your secondary school teachers were, or are, just spouting opinion. It's very easy to say that everything is subjective, but, for example, whether you believe in gravity or not, you're not going to float away any time soon. Part of the beauty of humanity's ability to learn, however, is its ability to change perspective based on what's observed. When I was in school, we were taught that there are nine planets in the solar

system we currently inhabit. Then, we discovered a planetary mass slightly larger than Pluto and the decision had to be made whether to have ten planets, maybe more, or to wipe Pluto's credentials as a planet. I digress, but by this I mean we observe, learn and then adjust our views depending on what we discover. Further and higher education is an amazing thing that way – we don't just learn, we learn to *teach ourselves.*

The difference between further and higher education, at least in the UK, is denoted as the difference between college courses such as BTEC national diplomas and A-levels, and undergraduate study courses such as bachelor's degrees. The main difference between the two is that undergraduate and postgraduate courses in higher education are based around autonomous or 'self-led' study. This is the idea that other than targeted, open lectures, you source a lot of the supporting evidence for the work you do yourself. It's a very different form of studying, and it takes a lot of adjusting to, but it's massively liberating. Part of working autonomously involves managing your time and using it productively. Whereas in school you have timetabled lessons pretty much 9am–4pm weekly, when it comes to university, and to some degree, college, it's up to you to make sure you're hitting your deadlines and meeting your targets.

A lot of people with ASD and dyspraxia struggle with timekeeping and it's still something that I have problems with myself. However, with the accessibility of both free and paid timekeeping software, it is becoming easier to manage. One of the greatest mistakes I and a lot of other people make is not factoring in recreational time, and 'burning out'. One of the toughest parts of keeping a timetable, aside from this, is that life is non-linear. If you have a busy life in general you'll find that your timetable seems to reshuffle itself of its own accord a lot of the time. People will always make demands on your time, but reshuffling timetables when you have Asperger's can

be difficult. A timetable fast becomes a routine, and when you change parts of it to factor in events such as chores and family responsibilities, which can often pop up out of the blue, it can be a shock to the system.

Very often, the trick to effective timetabling can be avoiding timetable-based routines altogether by setting targets instead of set time periods for work deadlines. For me, both writing this book and studying for a degree set new challenges in terms of time constraints and I was finding I'd spend more time reshuffling my timetable than I did working. More than this, I was suffering the same side-effects as I do when I break a 'set-in-stone' routine; I was feeling misplaced and disoriented and I'd find it immensely difficult to concentrate on anything. When I'd purposely put this time aside to work, this was a complete deal breaker. It meant that during time completely devoted to a specific task, I felt so unsettled that I couldn't focus on that task at all. To combat this, I've found that rather than setting time slots in terms of work or revision, i.e. working from 3pm to 5pm, making fluid targets works better. For example, when I started writing this book, I set targets to work from 10am to 5pm with an hour break. I found that whenever anything encroached on this time I couldn't concentrate and it became more and more difficult to reshuffle time efficiently. Now I have a daily target of 500 words a day; it's simple and achievable, but more to the point, it's not set in stone temporally. As long as I reach that target at some point in the day, I'm on schedule. The same can apply to coursework or reading; the target could be to read a certain number of pages or to complete a certain essay question. Part of the beauty of this way of working is that it can work within an existing timetable. In this sense, timetabled work hours become more fluid, and the hours themselves aren't the be all and end all, they are simply avenues to reach projected targets.

Recreational time can be a bit of a paradigm when it comes to timekeeping. First off, there are no half measures. On the one hand, it's important when creating a timetable to factor in time for 'defragging' and recreation – make it very clear that this time is books away, no-more-work chill time (unless reading is how you prefer to relax, in which case, don't put the book away). The other option is to leave it out completely. By this I don't mean just timetable work into every waking hour until your fingers bleed and you end up speaking primarily in Shakespearean prose or algebraic formulae. The idea of 'recreation by omission' is simply that you complete a certain target in a day and then the rest of the time is time spent on your own terms. I prefer this method as I am very aware of how quickly my mind likes to drop into routines, and so I try to make days as random as I can.

College and university tend to be a lot more accommodating than the primary and secondary schooling system, where the ethos of support tends to lack communication, is somewhat rigid and inflexible and is, frankly, a little autistic. When it came to university, I found that the support network was not only great, but also gave as much or as little support as I wanted. Something I learned the hard way, however, is that while the support is there, you need to ask for it! This sounds the most obvious thing in the world, but while I disclosed that I had an ASD, that I was dyspraxic and that I had bipolar disorder, I didn't disclose that I needed help, and exactly what kind of help I needed. While there are systems put into place to prevent this kind of thing from happening, it's all too easy to forget that other people don't know what you struggle with, especially when it comes to 'invisible disabilities'. I get told a lot of the time that you wouldn't know I had an ASD at first, and this is great, but looking as if you don't need help can be a barrier to getting support.

The important thing to remember in terms of support is that *you* decide the level of support you want. Going through college, I had a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) with me in all lessons, and while the reminder of where I was supposed to be going was great, in lessons I found their presence distracting, and it was affecting my work. We spoke about it and agreed this wasn't needed in class, and so I just got the reminders. On top of this, I was able to use a laptop instead of pen and paper, as I write extremely slowly. I suppose the crux of the matter is that while it can sometimes be difficult to 'upgrade' in terms of support by gaining more than you currently have, establishments will rarely argue if a change of support means a decrease in resources needed to fund it. Just be very careful when making decisions to remove certain provisions, as getting them back if you decide you made a wrong decision can be problematic!

However well put together a support system may be, problems can and do crop up. Dealing with these promptly is key to moving forward, especially if they stymie your ability to work properly. I have, like many others, been in the situation where an issue I've been having has caused me to get behind on my work because I've waited to see if the situation would resolve itself. If you have a problem, don't just wait it out and see if it gets better! There are very few situations in life where this strategy works. Make sure you tell someone if there is something going wrong, both academically and in terms of welfare during college or university hours. Many people find it tough to articulate their problems, and many more people suffer from *l'esprit de l'escalier,* or 'the wit of the staircase' – thinking of the perfect thing to say long after the time to say it has passed. If this is you, you may find writing key words down before a support meeting helps, or even skipping the speech altogether and corresponding by email. I always find it much easier to articulate my thoughts in writing rather than speaking on a one-to-one basis; when

dealing with your problems, as in many areas of life, you should always play to your strengths.