

So, let's tell the story of my Asperger's diagnosis. When I was around 16 to 17 my mother began to notice me exhibiting a number of unusual behaviours and encouraged me to seek an appointment with the youth mental health service for counselling. She wasn't pushing for me to attend specifically because of suspicions of an autism spectrum condition; that idea didn't come up until my counsellor brought it up quite some way into our sessions. My mother just knew there was something odd, different, unusual and strange about some of my behaviours. My unusual behaviours were starting to be a problem, and beginning to inconvenience her life as much as mine. Initially, sessions focused more generally on my life, my oddities, stress and unusual methods of stress management. I talked about family issues, I talked about school and eventually I started to talk about feeling overwhelmed by changes to routine. My counsellor recognised that I was engaging in stimming when stressed in sessions, something I at the time didn't know existed, and she recommended I seek

an assessment for Asperger's. I brought the suggestion up to my mother, who after reading up on the condition, quickly got on board with the idea, as it seemed to explain a lot of the odd quirks I had spent most of my life exhibiting. I went through the assessment, and was diagnosed with Asperger's a week before I turned 18. The result of this was that I was diagnosed and then with no further support, I was dropped from my counsellor and left to understand the diagnosis myself. I had become too old for the youth mental health service, so I was instantly dropped from support.

My mother took to the diagnosis like a duck to water; she very quickly noted that many of my long held behavioural quirks now made sense, and was quick to help me find support groups and materials to learn how to better cope.

My stepfather on the other hand was a lot more wary of my diagnosis. He's considerably older than my mother, and was born in a generation where mental health support was far less widely recognised as legitimate. As a result, he had some scepticism in the early months after my diagnosis. He was also considerably less open than my mother to LGBT topics, hence my having not come out to him as trans yet. The result of this is a story about how my autism symptoms, as well as my hidden trans status, both exploded in a very angry and emotional argument one day after dinner.

The fight when I came out to Dad

In the months after getting diagnosed with Asperger's, my life had begun to change considerably. On the one hand,

putting a name to my condition allowed me to research coping mechanisms and discover formally that stimming was a thing that existed. As a result of knowing my odd tics were a recognised thing, and something that genuinely served a purpose in helping me manage my symptoms, I began to stim more visibly, no longer forcing the same level of secrecy on actions designed to help me stay calm and concentrated.

However, at the same time, I was hiding a pretty big secret with regards to my trans status. I could see knowing I was trans and worrying about me transitioning, but not being able to share that with anyone around her was putting a toll on my mother, which was distressing for me to see. I was trying to live two simultaneous lives by this point: my social life with friends as Laura, but my home and work lives under a male name and pronouns. I would have to hide specifics of where I had been, I couldn't invite friends to my house and any time I left the house I had to smuggle out clothing hoping nobody would ask what I was carrying so secretively. I couldn't share any pictures of the time I spent with my friends. I couldn't show my family the creative projects I was working on, as they were under the name Laura. As a result of this exhausting double life I was trying to live, I found my anxiety was considerably worse, and I ended up experiencing even more trouble keeping myself emotionally in check. This was paired with me moving to sixth form, where there was even less routine and structure than GCSE education, and in spite of better understanding of my condition and coping mechanisms, my visible autism traits were becoming at times more obvious and extreme.

One night I was trying to help wash up after dinner but was struggling due to some oversensitivity to the smells involved, and I asked to be excused. My stepdad said no, I had to stay and help, which I tried to do, taking breaks during the process to stim. Dad did not respond well to this. He started shouting about how I had really been playing up my autism symptoms since I received a diagnosis, and was clearly just acting up for attention, and to get out of doing things I didn't want to do. I didn't respond. I just spent a few seconds hugging myself and rocking, then tried to get back to the chore at hand. He kept getting louder, telling me I needed to just stop doing the stimming and stop acting like autism was a real issue in my life, telling me the need to stim was something I had invented for my own convenience. I continued to become more anxious, trying to stim to deal with the noise and the allegations and the smells. He continued to insist I was stimming just to get him to stop telling me truths I didn't want to hear.

I felt trapped, cornered and overwhelmed, a feeling that grew to a full meltdown, where I took myself to one side and started hitting at my own head. I felt like my head was full of static, it was in my eyes and ears and brain and mouth and it was overwhelming me, like a swarm of angry bees or an untuned TV, and I just didn't know how else to get myself back into a focused state. Hitting myself was very loud sensory information, which I knew when to expect. I could focus on the hitting and get through the static and back to the room. It's not healthy, but it's what I did.

This encouraged Dad to just shout louder about how I was

making everything up. Mum chimed in, stating that I was dealing with more than just the autism, and if he only knew he might have some empathy. Dad started shouting that if there was something else in my life, I should explain it now.

And that's how I came out as trans to my dad. I was in mid-autism meltdown, hitting my head, crying and overwhelmed, and I sort of scream shouted at him that I felt uncomfortable in my body and wanted to live as female. Things calmed down a little from there. There were reassurances. I was given some space to breathe in silence until I felt better. I gave a little explanation and then went to bed. It wasn't ideal, but it was out in the open at least.

From here, things got rough for a while. I was still living at home, but the lack of structure created by moving from GCSE education to A levels was taking its toll on my mental health. I reached a point where I was having to be self-motivated, in an incredibly fluid routine environment, and things didn't go well as a result. Where I had been a very successful student at GCSE level, I failed my A level exams twice in a row at two different schools, due largely to having too much openness and too little structure in my routine. There were no longer any formal seating plans, I might have multiple teachers for the same subject, I bounced between different start and finish times every day and was entirely responsible for finding a way to create a stable structure out of things. After I failed my exams for the second time in a row, I panicked. My entire life plan up to that point had been school, then A levels, then to go off to university. I had planned my life around this traditional education to employment pathway, and without that I honestly

had no idea what I was meant to do with my life. The world was completely wide open, with no predefined path, and no planned options, and I had no clue how to respond.

I think the way I ultimately responded says a lot about where my life was at that point. I kept going to sixth form, in spite of no longer being enrolled there as a student. I didn't tell my friends I had failed to get accepted to my second year, I didn't tell my parents; I just went to the school cafe which was open all day and the main social area, socialised for a few hours and then went home. I couldn't work out how to handle the idea that I had no remaining direction for my life, and I was terrified of the consequences of admitting to my parents that I had failed my exams a second time. In hindsight, it's obvious I could have, and should have, just talked to my parents and asked for their help and support to make a new plan for the future. I didn't, not because they'd ever done anything to make me feel I couldn't safely talk to them, but because I felt like everything I was doing in my life was making me a failure without a future. Having been treated as one of the bright kids at school, I thought the fact that I was suddenly failing would be put down to laziness, and didn't know how to explain the factors causing me problems. I was afraid that they would see me as having given up on life, as having decided that post-autism diagnosis I no longer had to try and could just laze through life, and was afraid that they would be just as afraid as I was about my uncertain future. I pretended to keep going to college for several months, before eventually being caught out by my mother. She contacted the school to check in on my attendance statistics, learned I was no longer a student, and I

had probably the most difficult day of my life as a result. I came home filled with guilt, unsure how to explain to my mother why I had done what I had done, failed to give any reasonable explanations, and went to bed without dinner to cry myself to sleep.

The months that followed involved invasions of privacy, which limited my ability to explore my gender identity safely at home, and robbed me of the feeling of comfort and security that four solid predictable walls provided me as someone with an autism spectrum disorder. I was subjected to rules, stipulations and slowly moving goalposts regarding when and how my transition would eventually be supported. I was a depressed young adult whose actions had led to them having no privacy, no plans for the future, no ability to explore who they were and no idea how they were ever going to get to a place in life where they would be happy about who they were. You could argue it was my own fault, but it was a very rough time in my life. I remember that time in very vague terms. I remember a depressed haze, a muddle of days and weeks filled with sadness, loss, confusion and guilt. I remember having no clue who I would be a few years down the line, or if I would even still be here. Probably the worst part of it all was that I knew I was depressed, but I was afraid to get help, for fear it would stop me being able to get help transitioning.

Things did eventually start to pull back together. I got a job at a budget supermarket, I started making enough money to pay rent to my parents, I was able to start getting some privacy back into my life and, after a considerable amount of time, I was able to start presenting as female here and there at home.

My parents were not happy with me spending most of my time alone in my room after work; they wanted me to contribute to housework and socialise more, but I honestly just wanted space to talk to friends online who fully accepted me as Laura, and were willing to let me just explore who I was going to be going forwards. I ultimately moved out of my parents' home, into a tiny one-bedroom flat above a pub with my girlfriend, where I was able to present full time as female without any worry of being misgendered or dead named. I found it tough, but my life was becoming my own, and I was starting to find the freedom to work out who I was all over from scratch, on my own terms.

Coming out at work didn't go very smoothly. On paper, my workplace appeared reasonably supportive. When I brought up the topic of transition with my boss, and explained to him that all those days I had to leave work early were for therapy about gender, he was understanding enough to get that he had to do things right and couldn't prevent me transitioning. I took a week away from work, was given a new female uniform and name tag, and came back to work as Laura. Employees were generally quite good about things, for a few months, until things went wrong. In terms of employee response, a few staff members got funny about me using the women's bathroom, slip ups with my name and gender became more common, I walked in more than once on transphobic discussions about me and I found out that at least one staff member had requested not to be put on shifts with me following my transition. I ended up leaving the job within a few months of transition, but thankfully had a backup job already lined up. During my time

working at the supermarket, I had been spending most of my free time writing unpaid articles about video games on the internet. It started as a way to pass the time and keep myself engaged at work. I had always enjoyed talking about video games with my peers, and I was aware that there were people on the internet who did it as a full-time job. I wasn't sure how to make the leap from unpaid to paid work, but I knew that a portfolio of free work was a place to start. I came up with ideas in a notebook while at work, wrote them when I came home at night and repeated this every day for quite some time. When I left the supermarket job, I took a risk. I had a few months' savings and I had a bit of an audience online, so I took one month to try to make enough money to survive purely by writing about games. It was a career I had only ever done under a female name; I'd been writing as Laura from day one, and in that first month I had made just enough money to scrape by and survive. From then on, I was only ever Laura. I was working a dream job, I was living full time as Laura, I was in a phase of my life where people only knew me as Laura, and that was sort of when I feel my life truly began.

I was Laura. I was out in the world, I had a career goal to build and work through. My life was my own, I could set my own predictable schedule that didn't change from one week to the next, and I could freely explore who I was and how I wanted the world to see me. This was when I started to finally build a life that worked for me, as a woman and as an adult living with autism.