

CHAPTER 8

ACCEPTING MY AUTISM

Although knowing why I was different helped me, this was only half the battle won. Accepting my autism was a different challenge entirely. Before adolescence started at 14, I didn't overthink everything. Struggling with acceptance and overthinking has been an internal conflict for me since then and has caused big waves of mental instability.

At high school, I was initially so fearful of how my peers would react if I told them I was autistic. When they saw I had a learning support assistant next to me in class, they asked me if I was dyslexic. As my school specialised in teaching dyslexic students, this was common and readily accepted. I thought about it for a second, and then decided that it was a great *get-out-of-jail-free* card and nodded. My peers seemed happy with that explanation, and nothing was said after that. I then became desperate to be dyslexic as I felt so guilty about the lie. I pestered my learning support teacher to undertake a dyslexia test with me even though she had repeatedly assured me that I wasn't dyslexic. The test, of course, confirmed this.

I can pinpoint one incident that was the catalyst for my acceptance struggle and changed how I perceived people. After an away match for our school's Rugby Union team one Saturday morning, our hosts gave us a free meal in their food hall. I sat next to my teammates, listening to their conversations. Suddenly, one of them pointed to the wall

behind me and said, “Callum, there’s *gullible* written up on that wall.” I turned and looked at the wall, and they all started laughing. Great, I thought, I’m making them laugh. I feel like a comedian here. I laughed too. The same person said, “Now, there’s *gullible* written up on the ceiling.” I looked up, and they all laughed again. I felt like I was on top of the world. My dad had witnessed this. He told me later in the car that they weren’t laughing with me. They were laughing at me. My heart sank. I couldn’t believe I had let them take advantage of me. I blamed my autism. Following this, I put my guard up with people. I vowed that I’d never let anyone take advantage of me again. But I was also much harder on myself whenever I thought I’d misunderstood the context of something. I also started to hate that I was autistic. This happened just as my adolescence began, and that’s why it had such a significant impact. It was the start of my difficulties to accept my autism. For the rest of the chapter, I’ll talk about other internal and external factors that have made acceptance more difficult for me and hurt my mental health. It may sound like I’m flooding this chapter with self-pity, but it is how I felt then, and it made my life much tougher. I hope some of you can identify with my experiences and learn from them.

INTERNAL FACTORS

The internal factors are the initially small thoughts I’ve had in my mind that have become bigger and deeper over time to consume me eventually.

Feeling like a Burden

A learning support assistant sitting next to me in the classroom had educational benefits. However, it also made me feel like I couldn't do anything independently to a satisfactory standard.

There were also times when my learning support assistant couldn't make it to my lessons. As you can imagine, I felt confused when trying to follow the teacher's instructions without the usual help. I tried my absolute hardest at school. I was on time for each lesson and never messed around in class. When I looked around the room, I saw some of my peers chatting and laughing (obviously to the teacher's annoyance). Everything seemed so easy for everyone in both single and group activities, whereas I sat there *like a lemon* and was too scared to ask the teacher questions. I also felt that I was holding back my peers in any group activities. I always felt brushed aside when I tried to join in a conversation with the *cool* group. For example, if someone in the group said something, I would try contributing to the discussion. No one would listen, but someone else would contribute, and everyone would respond. I looked around at my peers, all of whom looked so happy and relaxed. I seemed to be the only one who was miserable. Luckily, a few peers, who weren't part of the cool gang, looked after me and gave me some sense of belonging. Today, I know that if I hadn't tried so hard to fit in with the wrong people, I might have avoided a lot of heartaches.

What made life a little easier for me was that my family never made me feel like a burden. For example, visiting Nan and Pops to watch a football match, catching up on *Coronation Street* or enjoying *I'm a Celebrity get me out of here!* with them gave me the happiness I needed to balance out the misery I felt in other parts of my life. Apart from my mum, I could also trust Nan to talk about my issues even when she was no longer looking after me. She reassured me, "You worry too much, Callum." It made some of the problems I had built up in my mind much smaller.

Always Wanting More

I never lived in the present. I also never appreciated anything I had achieved. Instead, I always wanted more, or I couldn't wait for a day, a week or a month to be over to move on, mostly to get away from the pain. At the same time, I felt I had to have more success than everyone else because of my difficulties. I was dreaming about the supercar I would buy once I was a millionaire further into the future. And Pops always used to say, "You'll be a millionaire one day, Callum." But rather than filling me with excitement and determination, my impatience and unreasonable expectations weighed me down.

Misophonia

Misophonia, also known as *selective sound syndrome*, is a condition that is common in autistic people. It means they find some low or high repetitive noises (such as keyboard

typing, eating noises or high-pitched voices and noises) agitating. Sometimes, these noises can cause meltdowns and, in extreme cases, shutdowns.¹

Misophonia developed for me during my teenage years.

Keyboard typing noises started to annoy and distract me.

This was due to my slow typing speed, whereas everyone else typed away non-stop. It was another reminder that others wouldn't have to try as hard to get double the results. And eating noises! I heard this sound above all else. People could be talking around me, or the TV could be on; I heard nothing but the noises of smacking lips, chewing and clashing teeth. I experienced the noises that triggered my misophonia as if somebody had amplified them with loudspeakers placed right beside my ears. This stopped me from processing everything else around me, and as a result, my head felt like a pressure cooker that was about to explode.

Body Dysmorphia

Body dysmorphia is a condition where people worry excessively about their appearance.²

It probably started for me with the *gullible* incident. I worried about the sound of my voice, posture and coordination. I struggled to listen to my voice on an audio recording and watch myself on a video. My diagnosis report in chapter 2 described my voice as *stilted, with separated words, and monotone*. I constantly listened for those characteristics when I spoke and got distracted. I monitored my movements for motor clumsiness, such as struggling to control specific actions and my stimming (I flapped my

hands about). I always looked in a mirror when I got the chance to make sure I had a good posture and forced myself to remember how I wanted to appear. I was paranoid that I was walking with an arched back. I felt dorky and self-conscious to the extreme. I felt watched all the time and couldn't relax.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

External factors are the changes to the world that took place around me. One significant change in the world, in particular, had a hugely negative impact on my mental health.

The Rise of Social Media

Social media was starting to grow in popularity as I was about to start my GCSEs at 14. Facebook was the leading platform at the time. I saw posts of my peers going to house parties, and I was wondering if I should've gone. I never had the urge to do so. I preferred to focus on my work. But I became concerned about not having the desire to join in. Was I missing something important, and would I regret it for the rest of my life? This added a lot of pressure and insecurity to my fragile mental state. Then there was the *like* and *friend* count. Seeing that others had more likes or friends than me on Facebook destroyed my mood and sent me into a pit of despair. I also wanted to look like my peers and tried to post *cool* images of me. Needless to say, they

didn't get any likes other than from my family. Social media amplified all the internal factors and blew them up to proportions that consumed my being.

Managing my Mental Health

There are more factors that I will mention as I go through the book. Poor mental health has affected me throughout my life. I have listed only one external factor here on purpose. I believe that most of the factors that contribute to the state of our mental health are internal; external factors can often be managed. It could be as simple as scheduling a time slot for looking at social media and then putting your phone away for the rest of the day. I would urge you to try this and measure your happiness before you make this change and after. Or, in a more complex situation, if you are grieving over a lost relative, friend or pet, try to think of something they said or did that drives you forward when you feel like you can't keep going on without them.

When it comes to internal factors, I implore you to talk to a relative, friend or mental health professional. In my case, I usually talk to my mum or sister about my mental health issues. I know it sounds cliché, but if you have someone to talk to, the internal factors eventually lose their power over you. Get a pen and paper if you can't accept other people's help or find it difficult to talk about your issues. List down the factors that you think impact your mental health negatively. Trust me. Get your bad thoughts out of your head! Extracting them onto paper (like I have in this chapter) is another way of making them lose their power over you.

They can no longer grow in your head like harmful bacteria if removed, even if you have to go through this process repeatedly for the same thought. I appreciate it may be easier said than done, but please try. Keep going! You've got this!

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Helpful Tips from Chapter 8

- Don't strive to fit in with the cool crowd. You'll have a much better time with peers who are also considered outsiders or inbetweeners.
- Don't let your impatience weigh you down. Be grateful for everything you currently have and look back at your achievements. Be proud of yourself!
- If you have misophonia, avoid sitting next to people who make noises that drive you mad. I avoid sitting next to people who eat loudly and wear my noise-cancelling headphones while typing or being around other people working with keyboards.
- Measure your happiness after making small changes, such as putting your phone away, switching off notifications and only looking at your social media feed for an hour a day.

- List down the factors that you think impact your mental health negatively on a piece of paper. Share them with somebody you trust if you can.

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