

Kids make sense to me because they are literal thinkers with high energy and no social filter; I always thought that I am simply “childish.” I have known my whole life I am different, and now I have an explanation. I received my Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis when I was 24 years old. I now have the knowledge I need to understand myself, how I perceive the world and how I can serve others. In the last two years since the diagnosis, I have begun working as a caseworker for a nonprofit vocational rehabilitation organization that serves those with disabilities and workplace barriers. My journey to a diagnosis and to my position was difficult.

Friends in my life encouraged me to pursue answers for the way my brain works. I contacted several autism testing centers before finding one that will test adults. Twice I travelled almost two hours for multi-hour appointments. When I received the diagnostic report, I noticed typos. I sent it back to the diagnostician requesting a more thorough editing of the document. Once I received the final diagnosis, I took a deep dive into the world of ASD research. What are frequent needs or struggles? What are common accommodations? Who else is like me?

At work, I joined the self-advocacy team. With the help of others on the team, I learned the importance of advocating for myself and telling my story—of using my story. Rather than convincing myself to work harder to be more focused, I asked for a stand-up adjustable desk to allow me more physical movement. Instead of expecting myself to make and keep eye contact in every meeting, I inform those I am meeting with that I will be playing sudoku to help me listen better. Whereas formerly I would do excessive research before meetings about communication preferences, I now find myself content to communicate literally and take others at their word; I am comfortable asking questions about idioms, nonverbals, and double entendre.

I am autistic. I have skills unique to me. As I continue to learn about myself and what role autism plays in my life, I am better equipped to serve my team members. I recognize sensory frustration, stimming behavior, fixated thinking, social miscues, and more in my team members *because* I am recognizing those things in myself. Pursuing a diagnosis, accessing self-advocacy teams, and serving others changed me. I am not limited by my diagnosis. Instead, I am freed! I am free to see my struggles in others—empathy. I am free to see my accommodations as potential helps—hope. I am free to see abilities in myself instead of inabilities—perspective. I am free to be childlike, to serve others, and to embrace my autism. I am free!

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