

# Personal Accounts of Being an Undergraduate University Student with Asperger's Syndrome

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**Chris Mitchell ([chrismitchell@mitchell17.wanadoo.co.uk](mailto:chrismitchell@mitchell17.wanadoo.co.uk)), diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome:**

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Hello all readers,

My name is Chris Mitchell. I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in 1998, while studying at the University of Teesside, UK. It was during the second year of my degree, in Media Studies, when I became very isolated and depressed that I found out I may have Asperger's Syndrome, a condition that I hadn't previously heard of. But after obtaining a diagnosis, I finally found that there was a characteristic for who I am. I had had it all my life, but I didn't find out until I was nearly 20-years-old (I was born in 1978).

Much came out at my diagnosis about my life that I previously wasn't aware of. For instance, when I was in primary school, I was having regular appointments with an Educational Psychologist who initially suggested I might have Asperger's Syndrome, but wasn't formally diagnosed. As a result, I remained in mainstream school with undiagnosed Asperger's Syndrome before entering university at 18.

For the first time, I was able to review my life appropriately since my diagnosis, such as my inability to make friends and socialise, and why I couldn't understand so many unwritten rules of social interaction such as dress sense, figures of speech etc. Also, I felt I could review my strengths and weaknesses appropriately. For instance, where I am weak is being able to deal with pressure and unpredictability. I like to stick to routine where I can to avoid high levels of anxiety for which I take Prozac to control. However, where I am strong is my memory for facts and figures and being able to recall dates and happenings. Many people who know me have told me that they would like to have a memory like mine. But what they sometimes don't realise is that although my memory can hold much information, rather like a database, I still have difficulty being able to think flexibly.

It was noted that I showed stereotypical Asperger's Syndrome behaviour when younger in that I had obsessive-compulsive tendencies, especially with my collection of toy cars and trains. Within my family, I am well known to have a remarkable memory for knowledge, facts and figures etc. People have told me that they envy me for this, or that they would have me as their phone-a-friend on Who wants to be a Millionaire?

My school life was very difficult, especially as I felt socially under-developed in a testosterone-driven environment, having no friends. Unlike others around me, I never developed a local dialect, often speaking words as they were written oblivious to the way they were spoken. This was a source of taunting for years. As I was gullible, not being able to tell whether or not someone was lying, I was also an easy target for winding up.

Like most kids brought up in the north-east of England, I was interested in football (and still follow Sunderland AFC) and wanted to play with other kids, but they often laughed at how ill-coordinated I was at playing the game. What used to frustrate me most was that my younger brother and my cousins were so good at playing the game, while I was the misfit by being hopeless. When my brother and cousins had shelves full of trophies and I didn't have anything like this, I felt even more an outsider.

I had hoped that the worst of my school years would be behind me once I got to university. Initially, I didn't think I was clever enough to enter university, but I managed to get in by default, so I didn't have much choice in terms of what subjects I could pursue. However, I was very strong at writing, and it was suggested that I could perhaps make a career out of being a sports writer/journalist, particularly as I could memorise all the commentary from football and cricket matches. I ended up studying Media Studies at the University of Teeside, as it was suggested that my recall would be beneficial here. Making friends at university was difficult, as was being away from home for the first time. Other students around me, I found, were often ambitious and career minded, so I couldn't relate to topics of conversation. Much socialising at university involved drinking, which I never took to.

I had reservations about quitting after my first year, but after some encouragement from my parents, I decided to stay on. During my second year, I started to get very depressed. I was very isolated and wasn't happy with my studies, and generally didn't want to be there. By now, I had had enough of all the constant changes to exam dates and assignment deadlines. The more depressed I became, the more I lost my appetite and wasn't eating proper meals, losing a lot of weight. Eventually, I began to self-harm. Fortunately, this didn't last too long.

After being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, I spent some time off university, where I attended cognitive therapy sessions at European Services for People with Autism (ESPA), where I got to meet other people with the condition. Once my self-esteem improved, I could go back to university for my final year. When I returned to university, it was recognised by my tutors, Philip Cass and Adrian Quinn that I had Asperger's Syndrome. To their credit, they read up about the condition and through my co-operation, made special arrangements for my final year. This included access to a student counsellor and extra time for exams. I also had appointment with a learning support worker who helped me with study skills. Following these arrangements, my work was much improved.

After diagnosis, my colleagues became much more tolerant of me, now that they knew there was a reason for why I was different. I didn't initially realise it, but they had become concerned for me when I wasn't around. One of my colleagues, Myles Ashby, contacted me while I was ill and said that others felt a little guilty in a way that they hadn't included me. When the course reps, Claire Dunwell and Emma Kingswood organised and sent a 'get well soon' card while I was ill, I really felt welcomed back. As a result, I got on much better with others. As well as Myles, Claire and Emma my other friends who

welcomed me back included Neil Gibson, Brian Daniel, Jonathan Dillon, Mark Buckingham, Michael Hill, Adrian Braddy, Tony Gardner, Charlotte Ward, Claire Wilson and Norwegian students Geir Sabel, Magnus Berning, Erland Rasmussen and Gunnhild Bjevre.

Although it all worked out in the end, I was faced with much uncertainty after graduation in terms of what to do next. I had found out through experience that I didn't want to work in the media and felt that I couldn't use my qualification. After I felt I missed out on much as an undergraduate student, I became interested in pursuing postgraduate study, which you can read about in the next part of my account.

I do much public speaking about Asperger's Syndrome in my spare time, mainly at school and community organisations. If you would like to contact me about Asperger's Syndrome, cricket, football, music etc. my E-mail address is [chrismitchell@mitchell17@wanadoo.co.uk](mailto:chrismitchell@mitchell17@wanadoo.co.uk) If you would be interested in me giving a talk about Asperger's Syndrome, I would be most interested to hear from you.

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If you are, or have been, a university student, have a diagnosis of HFA/AS, and would like to contribute an account of your experiences, then e-mail me at [cns@dircon.co.uk](mailto:cns@dircon.co.uk)