

Hello, I'm Esther. I'm in year 11 here and I have been asked to talk about Autism and my experience as a person on the spectrum.

The full title for autism is Autism Spectrum Disorder. Every autistic person has a different experience and struggle with or excel at different things.

The old symbol for autism was a puzzle piece, but that is no longer in use as it implies that autistic people are incomplete and are "missing something", which is entirely inaccurate. The current symbol is the infinity symbol which expresses that everyone on the spectrum is different and their experiences unique.

I can only speak for my own experiences on the spectrum, so it is really important for a range of autistic voices to be heard.

One part of being autistic that affects me the most is sensory sensitivity. People with autism tend to be affected by sensory input more than others. For me, sound is particularly hard. Even in situations that you may not think are very loud, I find overwhelming. You'll often see me with my noise-cancelling headphones, which help me by blocking out background noise and toning down the volume, meaning I can participate in things better.

One way to think about it is that each person has a different sized sensory cup. The cup shows how much input we can handle before feeling overwhelmed.

A noisy classroom fills up your cup a bit, then maybe the tags on your clothing a little bit more. Over the course of a day, our cup fills up, and we need to find ways to empty it to regulate ourselves. Everyone's sensory cup has a different size, and mine can hold less than most of you, which can make life a bit more difficult. For example, going into town is a massive trip for me, it can fill up my cup until it's almost spilling over, it's exhausting, and I need time afterwards to destress. I can't tune out all the sounds, smells, textures, lights, and general chaos like most people.

Over time, I've gotten better at this, and that's the thing: Autism doesn't go away; you just get better at it.

On the plus side, being more sensitive means I feel things that lots of other people can't, and I notice little things and patterns that other people pass by such as a tree that's growing into itself or a flower that's grown so it looks warped.

Another thing common in autistic people that I experience is stimming. Self-stimulatory behaviour, known as stimming, are repetitive actions that help me regulate myself, calm down, or express excitement. This can be a lot of things, like flapping my hands, rocking back and forth, repeating certain phrases over and over and over again (my friends can certainly attest to this), fidgeting, and more. Most of the time these aren't affecting other people at all, they just help me regulate. Some stims I do when I'm happy, excited, or comfortable, others I use in stressful situations as something to focus on.

I'm pretty much always fidgeting in one way or another. My hands are rarely ever still. I have this fidget that bring with me everywhere, especially to school, which gives my hands something to do and helps me focus. You probably can't really see this one, and

that's the point. I love this one because it's small and quiet. Lots of people benefit from fidgeting, not just autistic people, and as long as it isn't distracting or harmful to yourself and others, there's nothing wrong with it.

Finally, an awesome part of being autistic is my ability to hyperfixate on my special interests. I find it hard to focus on things that are too easy or don't interest me, but if it's something I am interested in, I can do it for hours and hours.

Lots of autistic people have one or several 'special interests'. This is different from neurotypical's interests, it involves intense focus on a specific subject, for a lot of people this often involves learning every single thing about a topic and being able to rattle off the tiniest of details.

For me I am obsessed with fantasy books, I can go on and on about Dungeons and Dragons and Stormlight Archive and Harry Potter. I have my own characters and extensive worlds inside my head. Other special interests for me are my art and nature. These interests can change over time. For some people on the spectrum, they will get intensely interested in a topic, then switch to something completely different.

For example, when my brother, who is also on the spectrum, was younger, he was *obsessed* with the *Cars* movies, we would watch the movies almost every day. Then a couple months later, it was Thomas the Tank Engine, then Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and now he knows everything about AFL and 90s grunge bands. Being able to absorb all this knowledge is pretty awesome. When a couple of autistic people band together, we become a well of highly specific, very interesting knowledge.

As an autistic person, one of the most awesome things is finding people who understand you. Finding people who accept your differences and love you for it. I've loved being at Southern because I feel like it's okay for me to be who I am. School has been difficult for me over the years. I've done a mix of regular school, online, and homeschooling, and now I am full time here. Challenges coming from autism have made it hard, but I've just needed to have flexibility and figure out what works.

I'm very blessed to have such a supportive school community and friends and family who put up with my weirdness and understand me.

I find comfort in knowing that God has made me who I am, and that he is with me. One of my favourite Bible verses is Psalm 139:13-16:

*“for it was You who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise You because I have been fearfully and wonderfully made”.*

God knew what He was doing when he made autistic people. We are not mistakes but like everyone, created by him with unique strengths and weaknesses.