

## Dear my younger #ActuallyAutistic self,

I'm writing from 2018. 20 years on from when you went for your autism diagnosis. You always knew you were different, but now you'll know for sure. It will take a while to fully understand.

In your preteens you'll wish that you were 'normal'. Normal is a myth. Embrace your difference. There will also be times in your life where you will force yourself through challenging and socially exhausting experiences just to match neurotypicals. That approach will only drain you. Prioritise your wellbeing. Socialise only when you want to.

Special interests will continue to be a joy. You're right, classic Doctor Who really is brilliant. In your teens you will become a huge Toyah fan. These passions are a huge part of who you are. Most people will never understand your passions or the pure joy they bring. No matter, this is joy just for you.

You've already experienced some neurotypicals demonising you because you're unlike most children. Some people will focus on punishing you for your 'behaviour' rather than trying to understand your needs. But you are lucky to have some wonderful people in your corner too, especially your parents and sister. As life progresses other neurotypicals will be your allies too. Some will fight your corner and offer such loyal friendship. They'll help you to see that who you already are is OK. More than OK.

Your diagnosis will set you on a path of self discovery. Sadly that diagnosis often comes with a hugely deficit model slant. You are NOT a list of deficits. You process the world differently and have different skills and abilities that are just as valuable as anyone else's. You're not defective.

In your teens, you'll think of yourself as 'mildly autistic'. You'll grow to realise that

functional/severity labels are a nonsense. Functioning by whose standards? Those historically judged to be 'low functioning' tend to have their skills underestimated, the 'high functioning' often struggle to get their needs acknowledged at all. Who benefits from that? Its not possible to be a 'little bit autistic' either. Mild? You're autistic, not cheddar.

There will be people who'll tell you you're pronouncing Aspergers wrong. They'll say it needs a hard G . Sod 'em. Its your neurodivergence- you can pronounce it how you bloody well like. Soft G all the way.

Some people will say ignorant things like: "but how can you be autistic when you can do X,Y & Z?" The inference being that you can't be a 'proper autistic'. Its tosh. Others wont be able to fathom why you're so positive about yourself. Some will insist that autistics need fixing. All of these comments say more about the people spewing them than you. They are wrong. Use your anger constructively to educate them. Be strong in your identity.

Remember that being proud of being autistic doesn't preclude you from being able to express your challenges too. The two things aren't mutually exclusive. Your proprioceptive difficulties mean sitting in most chairs will be an ordeal. Your lack of balance doesn't really improve. Most people will remain a mystery to you and you'll find them exhausting. Understanding your own emotions will be a huge challenge. And anxiety, it's a bugger. But you'll find ways through all this stuff.

In your twenties you'll meet so many other autistics who will educate, guide and empower you. You will find your tribe. They will be similar to you and different to you all at the same time- a broad spectrum of amazing people. You will learn that the power of shared experience is a beautiful thing. They will also lead in changing

the way society views us autistics, smashing stereotypes all over the shop. You will be so proud to play a part in that.

When I look back on 1998, I realise that many people just didn't understand you. And despite your parents championing you, the world just wasn't designed for you, matey. But know that many of us are working hard to make sure that autistics are understood, supported and valued going forward.

So go gentle, younger me. There's still so much for you to learn about yourself and the world. It's a pretty illogical place so its often difficult to understand. You will continue to make mistakes. That's OK. Good times are coming. You will find love in your twenties with an incredibly talented and beautiful man, Chris, who will bring you such happiness. You will experience some exceptional things professionally. Mutually loving friendships. Dreams will come true. You'll meet Toyah and most of classic Doctor Who cast (no, really! And you'll touch the original 80s TARDIS console. OK, OK calm down, deep breaths!) Sorry to say I haven't met Janet Fielding (Tegan) yet, but its on the to do list, I promise.

And the best part of all of this? You will grow to fully celebrate yourself as you are. And when you get nearer to my age, you will finally realise that you are of huge value BECAUSE you are autistic and not despite it. And it will feel glorious.

Be you and do it with conviction.

*Lots of love, your older  
#ActuallyAutistic self*

PS. Brush your teeth more, they stink.

Dean Beadle 2018



Dean Beadle has toured the UK for twelve years sharing his experiences of life as an autistic. He has also lectured overseas, including four annual seminar tours of Australia and New Zealand.. Through his humorous and insightful speeches Dean outlines his positive outlook on being autistic.

Dean also had five years experience as a freelance journalist and sat on the judging panel for the National Autistic Society's Professionals Awards. An interview with Dean is featured as a key resource in the Autism Education Trust training programme which has just celebrated training over 100,000 UK schools staff. In 2017 he co-hosted the Autism Uncut Media awards at BAFTA.

Dean is also a singer and in 2018 he will be performing at charity balls and various events across the UK.

Dean is honorary president of the charity 'AP Cymru', and patron of charities SPACE Hertfordshire and ONE to ONE Enfield.

twitter: @deanbeadleuk

facebook: Dean Beadle Speaker

youtube.com/deanbeadleuk