

Autism is a Superpower



With thanks to...

- Ana for helping me understand what my diagnoses meant to me and help with this booklet.
- Comfort and Hayley for helping me put together this booklet and for the amazing illustrations.
- My parents for supporting me and helping me to see that my diagnosis doesn't change who I am.
- The teachers who went out of their way to ensure I was able to achieve my grades.
- The team of professionals who helped me work through my difficulties related to my ASD and ADHD.

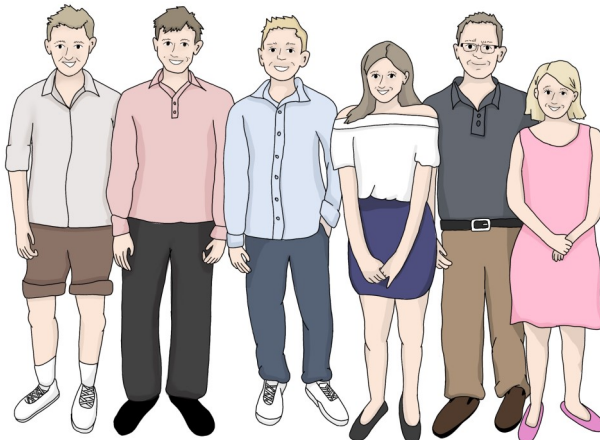
About Me

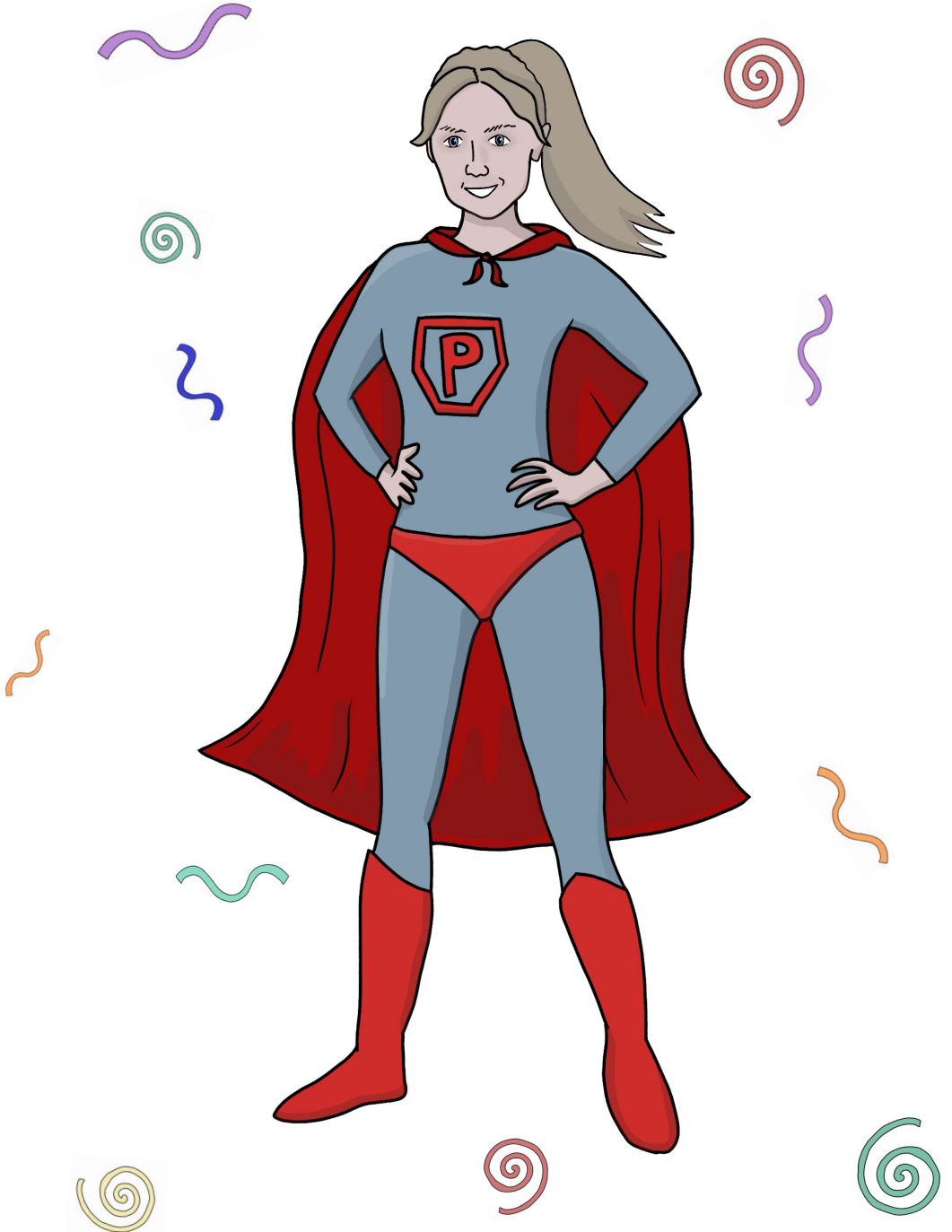


I'm Poppy and this is a booklet all about me. It follows my journey through my diagnoses of Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and what I've discovered about myself and how my brain works. I am just like any other teenager. I love sport, especially tennis and hockey and I've spent a gap year coaching tennis at my local club. I love listening to music and reading as these are a couple of my happy places. I have a big family which includes 3 younger brothers and my mum and dad. We also have 2 dogs and 2 cats so it can get quite crazy at times, but it never gets boring. This booklet is full of findings and explanations as well as pages which you can complete yourself. Before we start, I would just like to say that the biggest finding is that my diagnosis doesn't change who I am. I don't let it define me, but it helps me to realise my strengths and weaknesses (which we all have and shouldn't be embarrassed about) to better understand the world around me.

I was diagnosed with Autism and ADHD in the summer of 2019 when I was 18 years old. I will explain all aspects of my discovery in this booklet in the hope that I can help you understand yourself better too.

I was adopted at the age of 3 along with my 3 brothers. Because of this my Autism and ADHD were not picked up on, as my 'quirks' were put down to attachment issues. Also, undiagnosed 'autistic reality' was just *my* reality, so I would never have realised that what I was experiencing was different to everyone else.

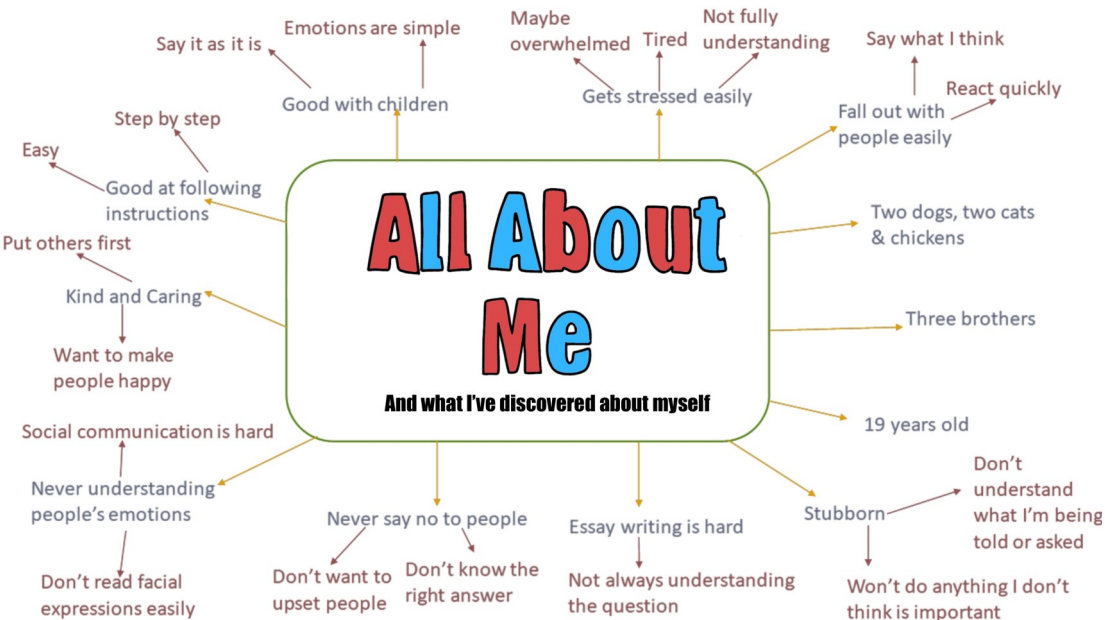


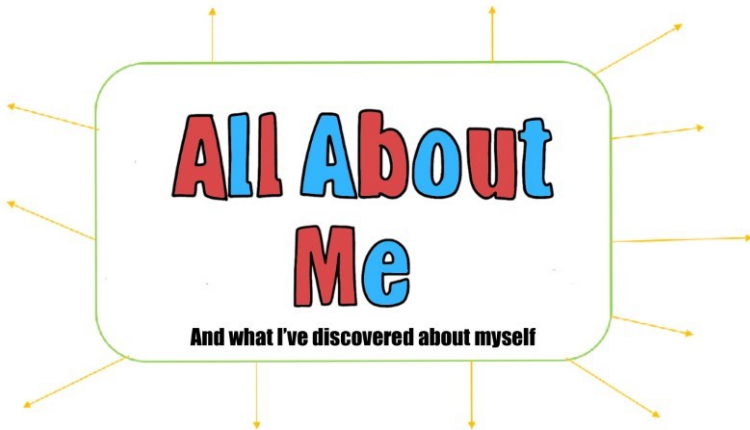


Discovery



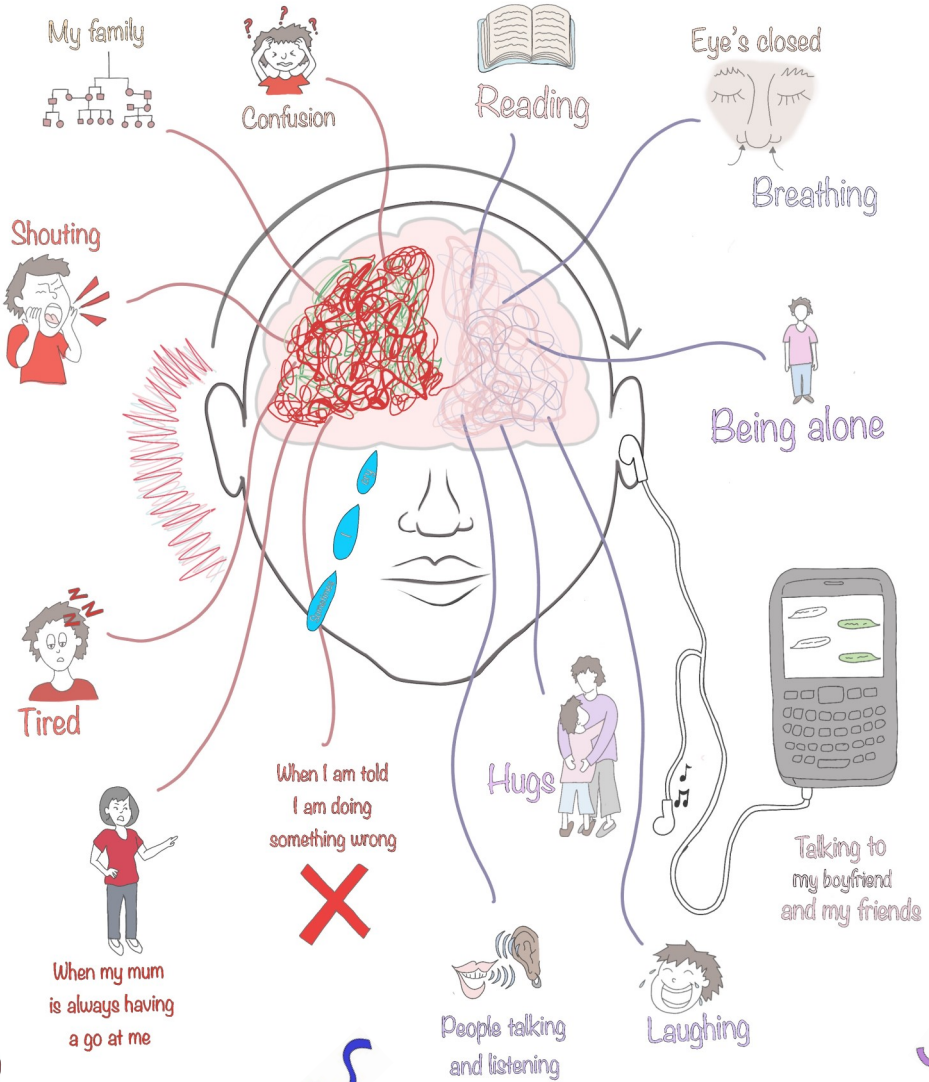
When I was starting to understand my brain a little better, I decided to try to create this mind map in order to show my strengths and weaknesses. In blue are the examples of things I find easy and also the things I find difficult. The red is the explanation as to why this might be. This took me a while to work out as I was very good at listing all my weaknesses but not my strengths. There is a blank mind map included for you to list your strengths and weaknesses. Try to come up with some different explanations that fit for you.





My Brain

I created this diagram in order to show how my brain works. From the picture you can see that I've displayed the left side of my brain as the crazy side of my brain and the right side of my brain as the calm side. On my left side you can see all the different things that cause me stress and how it feels to me. On the right side of my brain you can see all the activities and things that I can do and use to help reduce my stress.



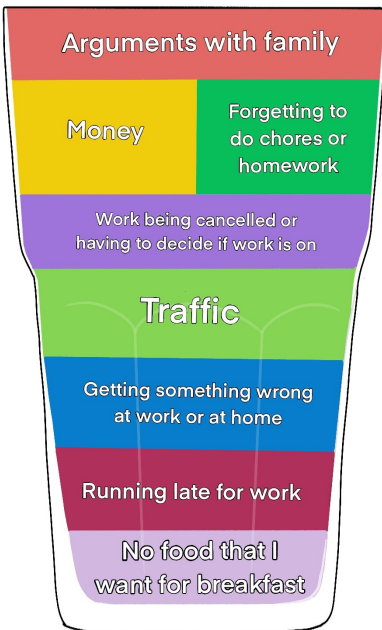


Stress Managers

I created this diagram in order to show that every day I wake up with two empty emotional glasses. Throughout the day these glasses get filled up. One glass represents what causes me stress and the other glass represents what I do to help stress. During the day I try to really notice how full the stress glass is getting and to manage as best I can. I try to keep both glasses level because if I have too much in the stress glass then I find the day more difficult to manage. There is nothing wrong with having a bad day here and there, but you do have to find ways in which you can help yourself manage the day. As you can see, I have filled both with many different activities or actions that either cause me stress or help me to manage my stress. For example, in my stress glass you can see traffic, not having the right food for breakfast and arguments with my family. They're all very different things, however all cause me stress. I manage this stress throughout the day by doing some things from my stress manager's glass so that I can level out my stress glass. The examples in glasses are the most important stressors and stress managers.



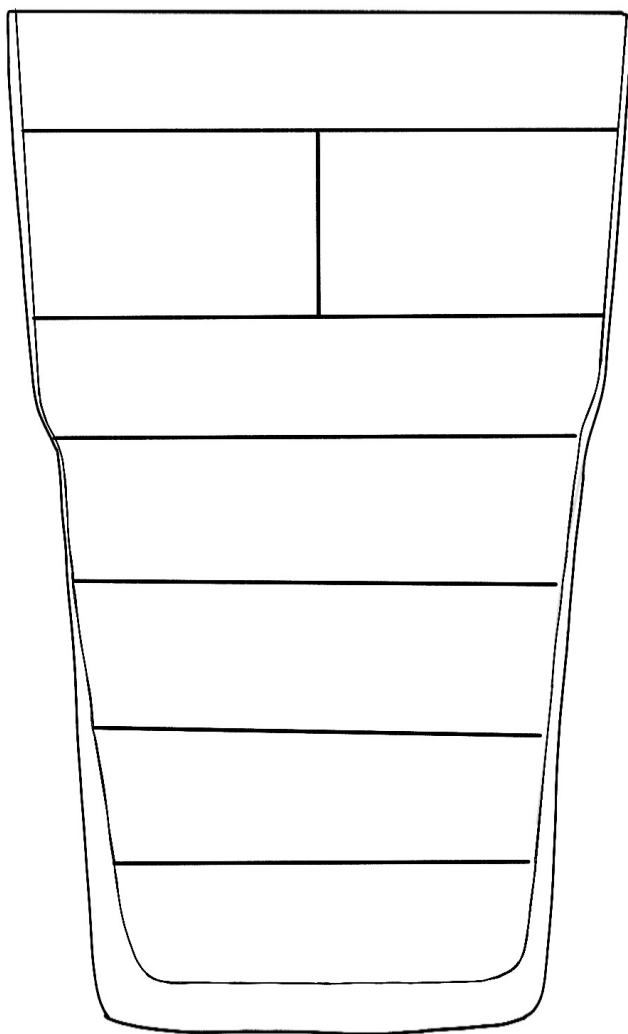
Stress Glass



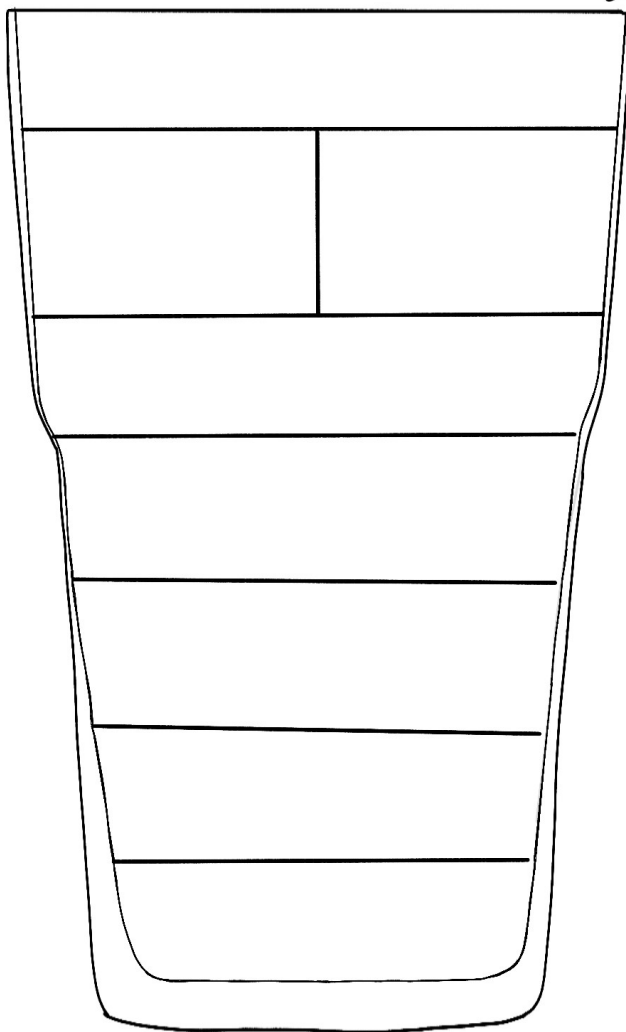
Stress Manager Glass



Fill in this glass with things
that make you stressed



Fill in this glass with things you
can do to manage the stress



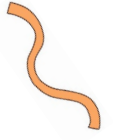


Organisation

Organisation has always been a struggle for me as I often get into such a muddle and then don't know where to start or where to go next. Imagine you have a piece of string that's as long as your arm. That piece of string symbolises tidying your room. My room is usually quite messy and so my mum often nags me to keep it tidy! As you look around your room to tidy it you spot some clothes on the floor, a knot appears on the piece of string, you then see that your bed isn't made, the knot becomes even more tangled. As you keep spotting more things, the tangled piece of string becomes more and more tangled until you lose both ends and you have no idea where to start or how you will ever finish untangling the piece of string. That's often how I feel when having to face daily tasks, such as tidying my room. I manage this by imagining cutting my piece of string into smaller more manageable pieces, which are less likely to get tangled. To do this I create a list, either on my phone or on paper as then write all the things I'll need to do to complete the task and tick them off when I've finished them. This helps greatly to reduce my anxiety.

Sometimes organisation can seem pointless or unnecessary, so I decided to create the following mind map to remind myself why I could keep myself organised. See if you have some examples of your own to add to the blank mind map.





KEEPING
MYSELF
ORGANISED

Four black curved arrows pointing outwards from the text: one to the top-left, one to the top-right, one to the bottom-left, and one to the bottom-right.

Language



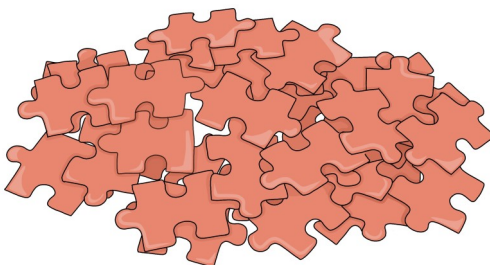
Language is one of the key ways people communicate and form relationships and friendships. However, for me, I struggle with day to day communication and can often misunderstand what someone is trying to say. The most common example of this is when someone uses sarcasm. Sarcasm seems like a completely different language to me, and although I've learnt what some phrases mean, I still don't really understand the use in everyday language, and that is absolutely fine! You shouldn't ever feel like you have to try and understand something that doesn't make sense to you and you should always feel like you can ask for someone to explain something to you.

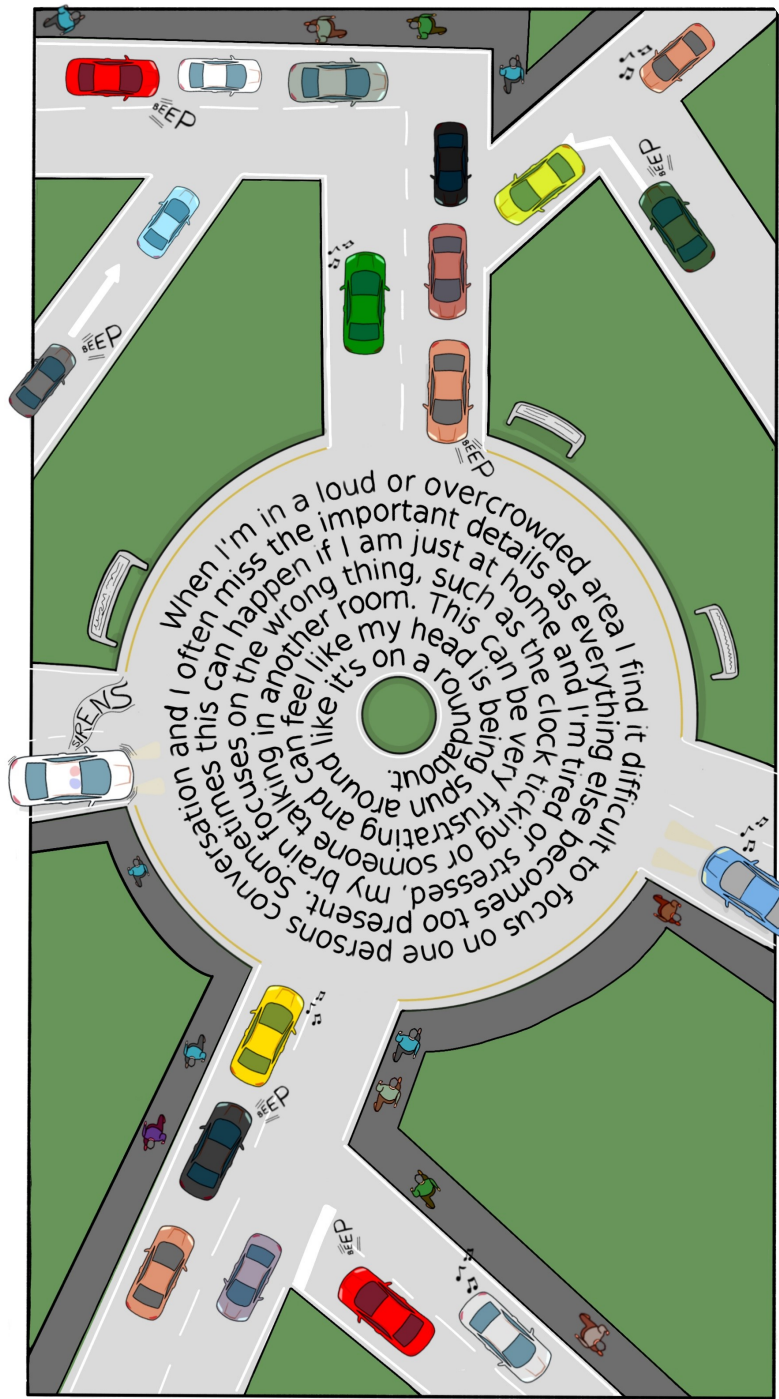


Communication



Communication has never been a strong point for me and I have always found it hard to communicate, especially with my mum. This led to years of arguments and not understanding one another. This was because neither of us understood how my brain worked and sometimes I would misread a situation. Imagine you have an 1000-piece puzzle, BUT all the pieces are the same colour. This would take you ages and ages to complete and at times you would want to give up completely, and sometimes you just need a break from it all. That's what my communication with my mum was like for the majority of my teenage years. However, as we started to learn about how my brain works and about how I struggle with communication, those puzzle pieces started to fit together, and we started to slowly complete the puzzle. It has taken a while for us to come to this point but I think I would say we are 98% complete and only have a couple of pieces left to fit into our communication puzzle. Our communication is a lot easier and I feel a lot more comfortable talking to my mum now than I have ever before.



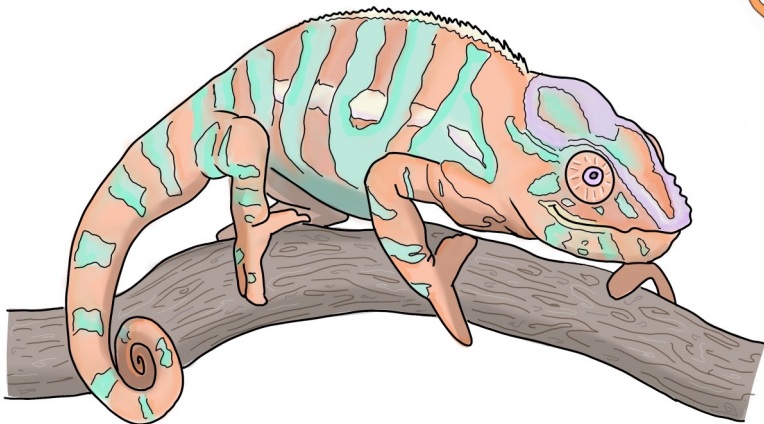
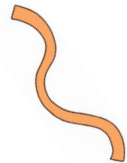


Masking



You may be still questioning why I wasn't diagnosed until I was 18 years old. It is very common for girls with autism to mask their autism. This means they hide their autistic traits and therefore don't "seem autistic". This can happen with social communication and other aspects of everyday life. Girls with autism have a tendency to copy other girls of their age and to mimic their behaviour, so as to hide their autistic traits and to fit in with everyone else. This is what I did. I managed to hide my autism so well that it wasn't picked up on until I was 18. I did this subconsciously and without knowing, however I still struggled with friendships and managing the social side of life, and still do sometimes. After receiving my diagnosis it was almost like someone had given me a pair of glasses so I could see myself and the world around me more clearly.

I like to look at masking in a visual way. Girl's with autism masking, to me, is very much like how a chameleon changes colour to fit in with its surroundings. It learns what its surroundings are and then blends itself into the background so as to go undiscovered. Much like how a girl with autism may act.



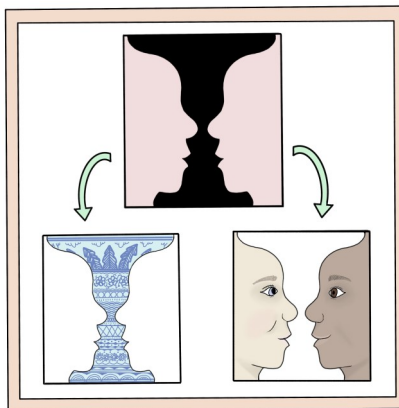
School



At school I found many things more difficult than most people. Firstly, the socialising side of things sometimes seemed near impossible and I struggled to understand my friends and would occasionally fall out over things I had misunderstood or taken the wrong way. As you can imagine this was very infuriating. As I started my journey through understanding myself and my brain better, I was able to get advice from people around me and slowly learnt different social cues. This made my life a little easier.

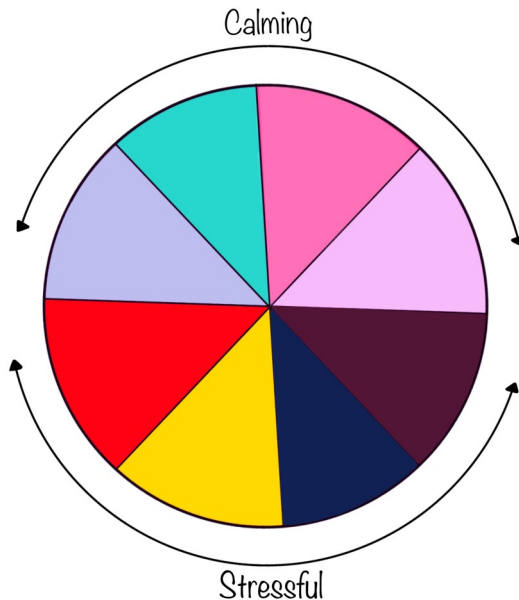
During GCSE's I would always get told that I waffled on and on in my essays and that I never made any concrete points. I didn't understand why I was unable to properly form an argument and write a good essay. I managed to get good grades at GCSE and went on to study the International Baccalaureate. This consists of taking 6 subjects instead of 3 at A level. Overall, I really struggled with the organisational side of this and often handed in work later than I was supposed to. However, the biggest struggle I found was actually understanding what I was being asked to do. I found it difficult to answer questions where it asked me to apply my knowledge to a different situation, or where the answer wasn't one I had learnt by rote in a textbook. Once this was explained to my teachers, they were able to give me the support in the areas I needed it most. Despite the fact I still haven't really grasped this concept (and question whether I fully will), I still passed all my exams and gained my diploma. This was one of my greatest achievements to this date and I can honestly say that I learnt a lot more than just "subject knowledge" whilst at school.

I thought this diagram perfectly showed how my brain sees things. Some people may see just a vase, while others may only see two faces looking at each other. However, I've always seen both which shows how my brain sees detail and how I often see things that others may not see.



6 Colours

For me, colours are feelings and when I feel something, I see it in colour. I can focus for hours, it's a super focus. I have heightened abilities, for example while you are speaking, I can hear the clock loudly. I am good at doing what I think is important, the other stuff doesn't get done. In a way my senses are my superpower. An example of this is that I see my emotions in colour. Each emotion has a different colour which makes me feel a different way. For example, blue colours for me are calm colours. They make me feel relaxed and help me to feel comfortable. Red to me is an angry colour. Red makes me feel stressed and uncomfortable. It's a difficult colour for me but I use my strategies to help me cope with feeling these emotions. Sometimes when I feel tired or stressed or a bit overwhelmed certain colours are more prominent to me than other colours. I will notice the harsher reds and darker colours. When I am calm and relaxed, I don't notice these as much but other colours such as calming pastel colours are more noticeable.



🌀 Achievements & Assumptions

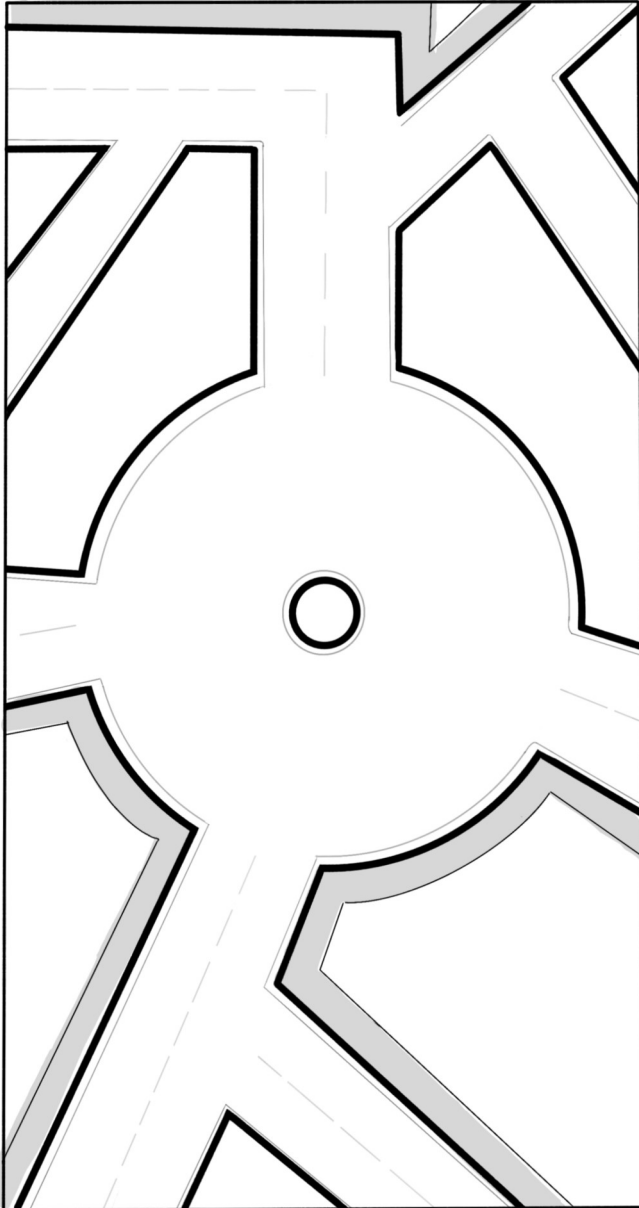
One of the things that I was hesitant about when I learnt of my diagnosis was that I now had a label. I was labelled with Autism and ADHD. I was worried about what people would think. I was worried how my friends would react. I was worried that I would lose friends because of it. Autism and ADHD comes with a stigma. People seem to think they know you, and they know how your brain works, but this is NOT true. Autism is a spectrum for a reason. No two people are the same. One person with autism may find social situations incredibly difficult and appear as extremely introverted in comparison to another person with autism who doesn't struggle with social situations, but may really struggle with sensory overload. The same goes for ADHD. Everyone assumes you will be hyperactive all the time, sometimes misbehave and be naughty, however again this is different for everyone. For someone to truly understand you and how your brain works you must first let them ask you questions, and you must be open to telling people what works for you and what doesn't. I found this incredibly difficult. I have never been good at saying what I want or need and this has often added to my stress and caused more problems. Also, people with neurotypical brains might not know what questions to ask!

However, besides all that, you must be able to celebrate your achievements. I wasn't diagnosed until I was 18, but by then I'd achieved a lot of things that some might think would be difficult for someone with autism. I completed my GCSEs and passed every exam, I passed both my theory and driving test, I am an LTA level 2 tennis coach, I've completed my first aid training, I've given assemblies in school, I went on a humanitarian project to Malawi with no access to communications home and I completed my International Baccalaureate and received a place at my 1st choice University. These are my biggest achievements so far, but even the small ones are worth celebrating. I most certainly wouldn't have completed any of these achievements without the support networks around me, even if they weren't necessarily supporting me from an autistic point of view.

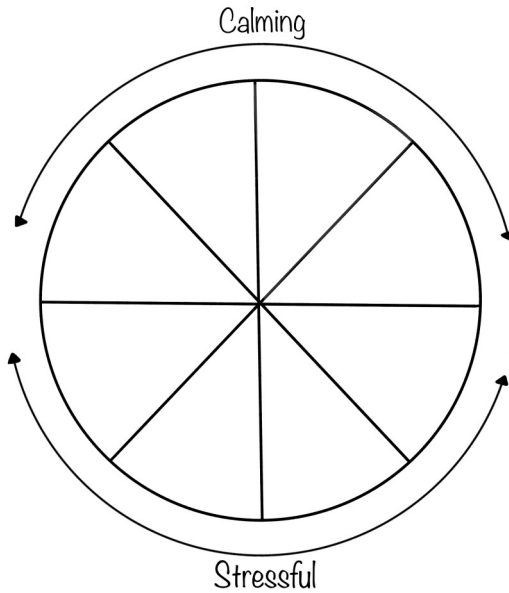


Fill in the roads and roundabout with
things that you find challenging

(Language, communication, noises...)



Fill in this colour wheel with
your own colours



List 3 things that you have achieved:

○

○

○



A Mother's Journey

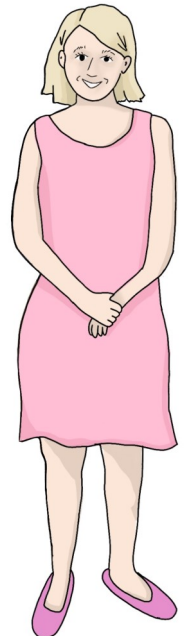


Since 2019 three out of my four teenage children have been diagnosed with ASD and ADHD. You may ask, why did we not recognise this sooner. This is a summary of our journey to diagnosis.

My husband and I adopted four beautiful young children all under the age of four back in 2004. We were told to expect anything and everything... little did we know what was to come. We have had many ups and downs... 90% ups.

Understandably the children presented with some difficulties, most of which could be attributed to attachment disorder. However, we were fully committed to giving these four special people the best childhood and opportunities in life that we could and were determined that we would be the very best parents we could be for them.

Why didn't we see that Poppy was autistic? She was a beautiful little girl, but she'd had a tough start to life. She had to have control (of course she did – she had to be the mum to her brothers), she was very in your face (of course she had lacked love and attention) but at the same time she found physical contact difficult (not all of her past contacts had been positive). She was also very black and white, always had to be right, she couldn't see the other side of an argument. At school she was very bright, but found it difficult to take turns. She had friends, but found it difficult to maintain very close friendships, the list goes on. They were all small things, though nothing that we were overly concerned about – she was adopted, she probably had attachment issues and we were confident that we could help her with love and time.





Get to the teenage years – Poppy gets to grammar school – fantastic. Poppy does well academically but starts to struggle to keep on top of her work, although she is very diligent. She begins to have social problems in a mixed sex environment and real difficulties judging how to use social media appropriately. Poppy is a good girl, she is a pleaser, but she keeps making very strange decisions, things start to spiral out of control as Poppy gets herself into situations we cannot fathom and starts to self-harm. We can't seem to find a way to communicate with her – but she's a teenager – that's normal isn't it? We don't know what to do, Poppy seems so unhappy and has fallen out with all her friends. Poppy agrees to move school. Things seem good, but then she starts having panic attacks and runs away from home, she is self harming again.... I am at my wits end – we aren't communicating at all.

I need help... I go to the doctor's – they put her on the waiting list for CAMHS, but the waiting list is over 6 months.... We are already at breaking point. I go down many avenues, and get Poppy a social worker, and contacted Kent Post Adoption Services. Lovely Dr Ana Draper and the Kent Post Adoption Support Team (PAST) start work with Poppy also liaising with a very special teacher at Poppy's school. Things still aren't adding up - the usual interventions aren't working, Poppy doesn't seem to be able to access some of the work that the PAST wants to do with her. They start to think that Poppy may be autistic. She undertakes an informal assessment and asks school to do the same. She appears to be ticking many of the boxes. I am called into school for a meeting where I am told that Poppy has autism. I'm absolutely confounded - I had never considered this at all. Poppy has had time to assimilate this and she is beginning to feel happier in herself as the ASD explains why she finds some of the simple things difficult - even though she didn't really know she was finding them more difficult than others. It was her normal. We get Poppy a proper diagnosis through another service, a multidisciplinary assessment centre, with Dr Georgie Siggers. And its not just autism but ADHD (again who'd have thought it - she wasn't all over the place as far as I could tell). The co-existence of ASD and ADHD probably explains why Poppy was not diagnosed earlier. They sort of 'balance' each other out in how Poppy presents to the outside world... but the Autism and ADHD are still there.



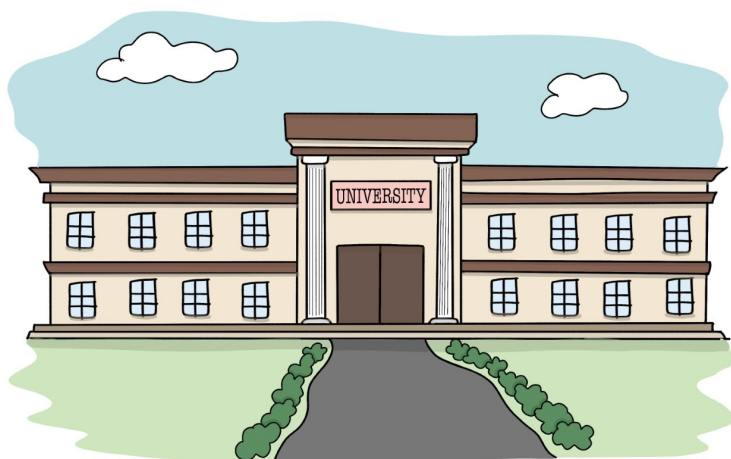


Almost two years on and we now realise that two of Poppy's brothers had similar (but not the same) issues - they have also now been diagnosed with both ASD and ADHD.

What do we do with this information? I've read lots of books, some of which has been assimilated by my brain, but some not. I have struggled with frustration and guilt that we didn't recognise the ASD and ADHD and didn't help our children sooner. I sometimes struggle to remember that the children do not have neurotypical brains and therefore might react differently to how I would expect them when presented with situations. However, it has given us permission to question how and why they do things in certain ways, and I am learning (slowly) how I can help - I think I'm about 25% of the way there - but it will take time.

The good news though is that we now know that there is a reason why they struggle sometimes and that it isn't anybody's fault. We just sometimes need to look at life from a non neurotypical standpoint and try to give them the tools to navigate life their way.

Both Poppy and one of her brothers are going to their first choice Universities next year - they have overcome so much and we are so proud of them. I know they will be absolutely wonderful and I hope will become happy adults too - they are all amazing and we are so lucky to have them in our lives.



POPPY'S TOP TIPS

1

Always believe in yourself and don't let other people dictate what you can and can't achieve.

2

Take time to read and learn about your diagnosis as it helps you to really understand yourself

3

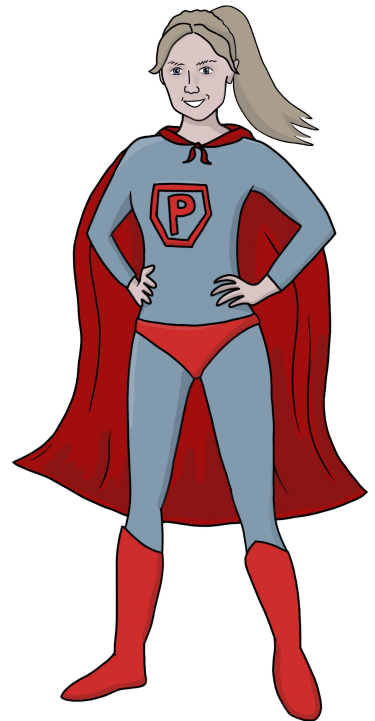
Build a support network around you of friends and family who are willing to learn about you and to help you when you need it.

4

Don't be ashamed of your diagnosis as it doesn't define who you are, it is purely just another part of you which makes you more special.

5

Have patience with yourself and be kind to yourself when you are struggling.





Conclusion

I hope you have found this booklet helpful and have been able to relate to parts of my journey. My main aim whilst creating this booklet was to spread a positive message about Autism and ADHD. During my journey, I have been able to discover some of the amazing things my brain can do, and this has helped me to see that my diagnoses **do not** hold me back. In a way my diagnoses make me determined to work harder for the things I want in life. Once I had figured out how different aspects of my brain worked and how I saw the world I then was able to find my strengths. I will never let my diagnoses define me, as they are part of what makes me who I am today. Just like how I discovered that seeing emotions and feelings as colours is my superpower, you may discover other incredible things about your brain that are unique to *you* and that help *you* understand the world in *your* own way and these can be *your* superpowers.



Signposting

Thank you for reading about my story! I hope it was as helpful to you, as it has been for me. In case you want to know more about autism and ADHD, here is a list of websites that might be useful in finding out more information on autism and ADHD.

National Autism Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>



ADHD Foundation

<https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/>

Autism & ADHD

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/related-conditions/adhd.aspx>





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