



CASE STUDIES

#KNOWYOURNORMAL

MY EXPERIENCE



When I look back on my life and in particular my childhood, I feel a lot of sadness for the little girl who though being herself was not okay. I feel frustration towards the professionals that refused to piece together the issues affecting my life.

But most of all I wonder if the right help and support had been available, whether I would avoided ending up so unwell.

As a child I had used Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for anxiety and behavioural issues. At this time, I was assessed for autism, but failed to meet the criteria based on the fact I had ‘friends’ and behaved well at school. To avoid more scrutiny, I convinced them I was ‘normal’.

But every day after school I would get home and be exhausted. Mentally and emotionally I was drained and although I acted like I was happy and socially successful; it was all fake.

It was in year 11 that I needed the support of CAMHS again. I was referred back after my anxiety became gradually worse but things soon changed and I ended up self-harming. My psychiatrist never really looked past the presenting risk and I was labelled as just another depressed teenager who couldn’t cope with school. A few days after admitting how awful things were for me, I attempted to end my life. My mental health team did their best to support me but no one could really say what was going on with me.

I was admitted to a young person’s mental health unit where I spent nearly six months trying to rebuild my life. A huge part of that was working through what led me to such a dark place. On the surface I had no specific reason to feel so anxious and unhappy and there appeared no obvious trigger to my breakdown. However, when my parents began to consider everything and talked this through with my CAMHS worker, they realised quite easily what they were actually dealing with. Through many battles with my hospital psychiatrist and the CAMHS commissioners, together with the efforts of my →

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mum and my CAMHS worker, I was finally reassessed for autism. A few days later, yep you guessed it! I was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum.

Don't get me wrong, it was a relief to finally have an answer and it opened up so much support from school and CAMHS, but it by no means cured me of all my previous mental illness. I felt let down that I was assessed based on a diagnostic criterion designed for the opposite gender. I also felt failed by a mental health system, particularly whilst in hospital, that was okay with an easy answer rather than the right one.

The one thing that made the biggest difference to my recovery was having a CAMHS worker that was willing to learn about autism and how it affected me. They spent hours with me working through the questions, feelings and confusion I had stored up. There was never a problem that couldn't be dealt with and this made life feel okay again. The flexibility around sessions meant if I was having a bad day, I could have my session outside or walking round and this made so much difference. There was no pressure to conform or pretend and I opened up easier and more honestly. An adapted CBT framework was tailored to my needs, not the needs of neurotypical people. My therapist also offered support to my parents in understanding me.

I can honestly say that having professionals who understand how being autistic affects me has saved my life. Because ultimately without the continued support I access, I wouldn't know how to keep going on the worst days.

WHAT WOULD HAVE HELPED

- 1 Professionals who understood autism and how it affected me.
- 2 Professionals who didn't look for the easy answer, but kept searching for the real cause of the issue.
- 3 Flexible and adapted care and support that respected my reasonable adjustments.

