

VIEWPOINT

My secret to happiness: Lessons from an adult with autism

BY BROOKS WOLFNER

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When I was young, I didn't know I was different from other people, and I didn't realize I have autism. Now that I'm 24 years old, I've learned who I am, about my autism and how I can overcome the challenges my condition brings.

As a young adult on the spectrum, I have faced many of those challenges, and I have also grown tremendously over the years. Although I struggled in school, particularly with math, I now hold a job delivering and stocking food at a hospital, and I live independently part of the time. I have also learned more about myself, which has allowed me to help others understand who I am, and helped me be happy.

One of the bigger challenges I face is change, especially sudden change. For example, I don't like being rushed because I like to do things at a certain time and in a certain way. I have a routine in the mornings before work. I get up at 3:55 a.m., stretch, use the bathroom and put on my deodorant and my cologne. Then I clean my face and get dressed in my work clothes. After I go downstairs and make my breakfast, I put on my shoes and call an Uber car. This routine gets me to work on time, at 6 a.m.

I arrange my space in a particular way, too. I like my clothes grouped by style and purpose. For instance, I hang my short-sleeved shirts together, separate from the long-sleeved ones. I put casual trousers in a separate drawer from formal slacks. And before I go to bed, I set out my clothes for the next day on a bench at the end of my bed.

I think life is easier when things are organized. If you know where everything is, it all falls into place.

Pool party:

When something surprising happens or is out of order, I don't respond well. Once, I got upset because the cleaning person washed my trousers too late for me to put them out the night before and they were still damp in the morning.

When problems like that occur, I try to take a deep breath and figure out how to solve them. If it's something I can't solve, I just try to get through it, and tell myself it's not a big deal.

At times, I have been willing to break with routine and try something completely new. Last summer, for example, a woman at work invited me to her pool party. At first, I was really hesitant about going. I worried because it was a new place, and in particular, I was concerned that there wouldn't be a place to change my clothes. In the end, her house turned out to be great and I was comfortable there.

I have learned to take risks because it allows me to figure out what I like and don't like. I have also learned to cope with unexpected situations at work. For example, sometimes when I go into a hospital room, there's a big family visiting a patient. That makes me nervous because it feels like there are many sets of eyes on me. But now I just take a deep breath and get on with my job delivering the meal.

Zoning out:

When I was in school, interacting with the other students was difficult because I never knew whether someone was going to be nice or mean. I also worried about what people thought of me because I have autism and act differently in social situations. For example, if I am talking to someone, sometimes I zone out and look away because either I don't feel like talking, or I find the

conversation boring. Other people don't always like that.

I am learning to get over my concerns about being different. At the same time, society has become more accepting of people like me since I was a child.

I have also worked on my social skills. I pick up on body language better than I used to. I know now that some people won't tell you when they are bothered, but you can see it on their face or in their movements. Also, I try not to interrupt people. My mother taught me to "hold my thought," so now I wait to speak until a person is done talking.

I have developed better self-control as well. I recognize bad behaviors, such as tantrums, and try to stop them before they start. And I've learned to control my fears. I used to be scared of tornado sirens, for example, but now I know the sirens are just a bunch of metal on a pole. Storms interest me now; I think they are fun to learn about.

Others learn from me, too. Not everyone at work knows I have autism, so sometimes I have to explain why certain things are difficult for me. Someone I work with once told me I wasn't putting food away fast enough, so I told him that it sometimes takes me a little longer to learn things than it does for other people. He understood. Once I develop a strategy for a task, though, I can consistently perform it well.

Owl friends:

One of my biggest accomplishments is my full-time job at Mercy Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. I attended a program for people with disabilities called Pathways to Employment, which prepares young adults for internships at the hospital. I had to wait for an opening that was right for me; it took me 18 months to get a job doing something I enjoy.

A lot of things besides work make me happy. I like to go on walks in the springtime. I like to play games, watch movies and go bowling with my friends. I love animals, especially owls. There is a pair of owls that live behind my grandparents' house, and you can talk to them. If you hoot at them, they come right to you.

Being with my family makes me the happiest, because I know they are there for me. My family members are my role models. My sister is caring, smart and creative, and I think it's cool that she is going to school to study people like me. Also, my grandmother and I are very close. She takes good care of me, and we have fun together.

When my sister and grandmother are not in St. Louis, I miss them. I sometimes worry about outliving my grandmother and my parents. I don't want to be lonely. My few friends are like me. I asked one friend to be my roommate, but he said no, because he didn't want to leave his mom. I understood that.

I am aware that I have a disability, that I am different and that there are limitations to that. But I think being different is a good thing. If everyone were the same, it would be boring. It's easier to accept and embrace who you are than to try to change. It's easier to be happy.

Brooks Wolfner is a 24-year-old man on the spectrum who works as a food service technician at Mercy Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. CeCe Wolfner is in her final year at the University of Kansas. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in developmental psychology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham this fall.