

# Social Stories

## The journey to understanding

### Sam

#### Journey to understanding

I've always known I was different. I excelled in school, especially in subjects that interested me, but I struggled with people. I never quite understood the unwritten social rules that everyone else seemed to follow so easily. Conversations felt like puzzles, and I often felt exhausted after social interactions.

During my teenage years, I started having periods of depression. I felt out of sync with the world, like I was constantly pretending to be someone I wasn't. At the time, I thought maybe I was just shy or socially awkward, but the feelings of exhaustion and disconnect never went away.

It wasn't until university that things really escalated. The pressure of balancing uni work, social expectations and independence became overwhelming. I went through a particularly difficult period of depression, struggling to keep up with my coursework and feeling completely lost. That was when I finally decided to seek help.

#### Seeking answers

I started researching mental health and neurodiversity, trying to make sense of why I felt so different. The more I read about autism, the more I recognised myself. I had always assumed autism looked a certain way – obvious, external struggles with communication – but I realised that many autistic people mask their difficulties, just like I'd been doing my whole life.

After a long process of reflection, discussion and assessment, I was diagnosed as autistic. It was a huge moment for me. Everything finally made sense. I wasn't broken or failing at life - I was autistic, and my brain just worked differently.

#### Learning to accept myself

Since my diagnosis, I've been learning to be kinder to myself. I no longer force myself into social situations that drain me, and I set boundaries to protect my energy. I've also connected with other autistic adults online, many of whom also found out later in life. It's been incredible to share experiences and finally feel like I belong somewhere.

I now understand that being autistic isn't something to be ashamed of - it's just who I am. My strengths and challenges are part of what make me unique. I still have tough days, but now I have the knowledge and support to navigate them in a way that works for me.

For the first time in my life, I feel like I truly understand myself. And that's a feeling I wouldn't trade for anything.

