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Turning Guilt into Self Esteem

TIPS ON FINDING NEW FRIENDS

by Courtney Weaver

TWO FEATURES OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) that differentiate it from other or similar disorders are social and communication difficulties. This can range from meltdowns to simply just not getting a social cue that seems to be picked up by others instantaneously. One of the consequences that can result from years of social interaction gone awry is that you can feel guilty about not picking up on those social cues that everyone around you seems to know but doesn't let you in on. As a result, you can feel despair about ever making friends and simply stop trying. I've certainly felt that way throughout high school. There were several times when my social naiveté probably alienated potential friends. After I would tell my mom at the end of the day about what happened at school and she would tell me how my actions probably looked in my peers' eyes, I would mentally kick myself for it. I would think, "What have I done?" By the time I was in Grade 12, I had become so anxious about screwing up that my high school survival social priority was to keep my head down, be polite whenever I had to talk to my neurotypical peers, get great grades for entry into university, do well in the high school drama production and get the heck out of the classroom if there was someone who seemed to particularly



eye me, even if they may have been trying to be friendly. That all changed when I went to Queen's University. Within four years, I had more friendships than I had ever had in my whole life (at least 10) and I have been slowly but surely getting more friends since then. How did I get from stressful survival mode to being more at ease with myself and with others, and ultimately obtaining several friends? I will explain in this article. I hope these experiences will help others who are experiencing similar social conflict and urge them not to give up.

One thing that you *can* do is find yourself a new audience that will not necessarily have preconceptions of you before they see you. That can be done by studying and/or living somewhere new. Moving away from your hometown is not for everyone. However, one of the benefits of living for at least a fairly lengthy period away from home is that there is a whole new population that doesn't know you and, consequently, any social blunders you may have made. You've got yourself a new population in which you can make new friends since they won't know you before they meet you. However, if you feel you would be too homesick, you can still find yourself a new audience by engaging in a different social/recreational group, since those enrolled in that particular group may not be the same people that you've had in previous ones.

In my case, by enrolling at Queen's University, I went from my hometown of Ottawa to Kingston and had the chance to see hundreds of new students who were from different parts of the world and Canada. Almost none of my classmates from high school ended up going to Queen's, so while there were hardly any familiar faces, there were many, many students like me who were passionate about their university studies which could make a good social starting point. Another added benefit was that my history lecture classes were filled with students who were not in the same

year as I was. Students who were in the second, third or fourth years of their degree could be in the lecture class I was in. This meant that I didn't have the same classmates for each class. The majority of the undergraduate friends I eventually made were not in the same university year as I was. A couple of them were in the last year of their undergraduate degree. In any case, finding yourself a new audience can result in up to hundreds of new possibilities for friendships.

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Another effective – and maybe the most important – way of getting friends is to become confident with yourself. It's a cliché expression but it is an important one. One way you can go about this is by looking at the qualities that make you unique and instead of simply remembering how they have made you stick out like a sore thumb, you can think hard and see the positive things you can do with those exact same qualities. When I was in high school, I noticed that I could sound like other people almost without thinking about it, especially if my energy was high. I became very self-conscious about that. But when I came to university, I realized that that exact same ability could be used to do voice impressions and make other people laugh. My voice impressions include Yoda, Forrest Gump and Mrs. Wolowitz from *The Big Bang Theory*. I have made several of my friends laugh with these and other voice impressions. I am now proud of my versatile voice range.

You can also learn from previous

mistakes and put what you have learned into practice with the new people you meet. My mistakes from high school range from offering a teenage guy a slice of cake which apparently suggested flirting (even though I heard him say that he was interested in the cake) to persistently not smiling (even though that's understandable given that I was miserable inside). Since then, if I am unsure about how to interact with guys my own age, I ask my mom for tips so that I don't suggest that I am romantically interested in them when that's not what I am trying to convey. When I've been a newbie at work, I've used subtle differences in body language and expression such as sitting up straighter when in the lunch kitchen and having at least a hint of a smile when looking at someone, so that others will not think of me as a grump in the kitchen corner. As mentioned earlier, having a new audience from which to find friends is fantastic because there will always be some new people who do not know you or your previous mistakes. It's your chance to make a good first impression with them.

Ultimately, don't give up hope. All it takes is one person to understand you. There are good people in the world. But going out into the world believing that you won't get any friends will be a self-fulfilling prophecy because you lose chances to get new friends if you have the mindset that you won't get any.

Work on yourself, keep trying to expose yourself to real-life social scenarios (there is no replacement for in-person interaction) where common interests can work in your favour, and believe in yourself. I wouldn't be where I am right now socially if I didn't do the things I've written about in this article. I hope that these tips help you as you aim to find friends who will accept you. They are out there. And you can find them. Go for it! ■