

Transcript of Podcast 046: Self-Awareness, Neurodiversity, and Dyspraxia

{Intro.

DAYNA: I'm not broken, my brain is not broken, I am just who I am, and that's okay. Everybody probably feels broken now and again.

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{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

The weather's really dropped out in the last week or so; as I type this we're into yet another day of mostly torrential rain. We've even dabbled with the idea of putting the heating on, a task not helped by the fact the thermostat to the boiler, which I shouldn't need cos in principle everything should be workable through the boiler itself, a fact which confused me for an hour or so when I couldn't get the boiler to fire up despite the boiler instructions saying it should be automatic, didn't have any instructions with it, and the instructions that exist are for a completely different one. No matter, a quick download and a few button pushes and everything works fine.

The flat doesn't have a tumble dryer and no real place to efficiently put one, which is irking my flatmate a little (why do European homes not have tumble driers, and when they do, they're shit' she asks), and we're getting to the stage where hanging stuff on the line in the lawn outside (something I've never seen anyone else do in the time I've been in the flat) isn't going to be that effective.

I hope the weather isn't too bad for the rest of October tho; I have a couple of trips away which are likely to involve being outdoors for a fair time. In mid-October I'm headed back to Nottinghamshire to celebrate a very old friend finally getting around to asking her boyfriend to marry her. The wedding's planned for about this time next year, and I'm going to be a bridesmaid, well, oh what did she say, her wedding theme will be quite fantasy adventure, and she wants us to be shield-theydems, of various styles and concepts, so I'm sure the warlock-wood-elf from my fantasy adventure novel work-in-progress will make an appearance. Because this is one of my friends and few of my friends do things in any way standardly.

Then at the end of the month I'm in London for a couple of days, mainly to attend an awards ceremony. It's not the sort of thing I normally do, except in this case I was one of the nominees. It's the Traverse Creator Awards; Traverse are the organisation that put on the travel blogger conferences that I've been to before and which I mentioned in a couple of my very early episodes - the conference in 2018 was where I finally kick-started the idea for this podcast, in fact. But yes, I'm in the running for "Best Opinion Piece" for my slightly quirky yet still highly informative post/pod on the history of Apartheid in South Africa. It feels weird to have been nominated for that post, given I'm not South African, although it is one of the most popular on my blog. I'm just amazed still to have been nominated, to be honest - it's gratifying to know that people out there like what I do enough to feel it deserves to be in the running for an award. Bear in mind this wasn't an award chosen by public vote - the nominations for these awards are chosen by the Traverse committee themselves.

After that I'm going up to visit my mother for the first time in ... I possibly still had my old job when I last saw her, to be honest, it was that long ago; I don't think I had the podcast. My aim is to get my step-dad to record something about his life for a future episode, actually, as I think it'll be an interesting topic.

Anyway. October is quite The Month for awareness and recognition days/weeks, some UK-specific, some USA-specific but still worth noticing, and some worldwide. During the course of this month, we have: Pronouns Day, Dyspraxia Awareness Week, Mental Health Awareness Day, Coming Out Day, and Asexuality Awareness Week, and in some or all regions of the world it is LGBT History Month and ADHD Awareness Month. It therefore seemed fitting that I make an episode or two that covers some of these topics, and talk about mental health, sexuality, and general self-awareness.

As this is such a large scope, and there's two overall aspects – sexual & gender identity, and neurodiversity issues - it makes sense to split this into two separate podcast episodes. Given that this pod is released in Dyspraxia Awareness Week, it makes sense to talk about neurodiversity first.

The two neurodiversity issues I most identify with are ADHD and Dyspraxia, and there's a large overlap between them. To be honest, there's a large overlap between a lot of the neurodiversity conditions, but that's largely because most psychologists have concentrated primarily on autism and most neurodiversities have a large overlap with that. One of the interesting questions this brings up is whether in fact they are separate conditions at all, but merely different ways in which the same, unnamed condition, manifests and presents itself. What's interesting in my case is when I've done online tests etc for Autism, I come out as having a very strong likelihood of being Autistic, but when I look into symptoms and recognised behaviours, every single one of them that I have overlaps with ADHD, and I have almost no symptoms of Autism that don't.

Someone who has been diagnosed with autism is my friend Kira, who here talks about their realisations and discovery of their neurodiversities.

{Kira - Mental Health 1

As far as mental health and autism goes, oh my god, I mean, my mental health has been rapidly declining [laughs] since I was about 15, because, you know, shit happens, is the way I put it, shit happens, we don't need to go into a tragic backstory, but you know, shit happens, that makes you realise that not everything's okay. The first instance of a full-blown panic attack, anxiety attack, I ever had, I was, like, 16. Doesn't matter about the circumstances that brought it on, not going to talk about that, but what it was was not understanding at 16 what it was, and people around you not understanding what it was either, because not all panic attacks look like they do on TV with the heavy breathing into a bag and bent over and you're fine in 15 minutes and it's like 'oh my god what was that', no. Right. This shit lasted for months. I felt so ill, I couldn't get out of bed. I was convinced I was dying, I kept begging the doctors to do tests, and MRIs, and everything, but yeh, it was just kind of like that was my first indoctrination in it, in nobody understanding what it was, and it was bad, it scared the living hell out of me, so.

Eventually when I got diagnosed I was probably about, somewhere between 19 and 21, when I got diagnosed with depression and anxiety and stuff like that, and they had better understanding and there was medication, and you just kind of learned to plod along and that sort of thing. You learn different coping mechanisms for every different person.

As far as autism went, that for me went undiagnosed for a long time, which is actually quite odd because it runs in my family, and it was picked up on in my brother's children, and he has ADHD, my brother himself has ADHD, and autism was picked up on in his children, but for me, nobody noticed. And it was more because I learned very quickly to mimic and behave like the people around me. And I didn't realise any of that was to do with autism, I did not realise that. I did not realise that the way that I see things, particularly when I try to figure out the logic behind things.

And the first time I realised this was actually arguing with a racist, strangely enough. When I was just sort of, I can't, he said something – I'm not going to go through the whole tirade but – he said something but at the end of it he said 'you should try putting yourself in my shoes and seeing things my way', and I just physically couldn't do it cos I'm just sat there going 'I.. don't ...'. I can't understand, I cannot understand racism at all, I can't do it. I can't understand where you're coming from. There's no ... because to me it logically doesn't make sense. What you're saying to me is that this person's colour of skin is bad, and I can't logically get behind that, because there's nothing there, there's no logic there to grasp to. And I thought this was simple for all human beings, I was like 'if I think like this, there's got to be other people that think like this, so how do people like that exist. How is that possible; what's wrong with them?' I never thought of it as there was something wrong

with me, I thought there's something wrong with them. Which I still stand by to this day, because there is something very wrong with racists, but that's a whole different box of frogs. But that was the first time I realised it, that I don't think like everybody else.

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At this early point I must say I've never been diagnosed with any of these conditions by a medical professional. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, and most importantly, it's because of my age. By that I don't mean that I'm too old to be diagnosed, although one of my personal issues is a fear that I'll walk into a doctor's surgery, raise the possibility, and be promptly laughed out of the building because 'only children have that'. My therapist (and I'll talk more about that later) has said that these days that sort of thing simply doesn't happen, but I'm still wary. No, what I mean is, given that neurodiversity issues are most commonly seen in children as they develop, they're easier to spot. Which is fine, if you know what you are looking for.

In addition, I've also never been diagnosed with them because, as a nation, mental health isn't as strongly advocated for as physical health, which means that provisions for it are far less. Like, I love the concept of the NHS, I think it's a really great idea, but years of underfunding by centre-right governments that promote the idea of individualism and libertarianism (and yes, I count Tony Blair in that too) means that it doesn't have quite the finance or resources to cater for everybody equally. And naturally they choose to spend more in areas more ... I guess there's more votes in heart attacks and broken legs. What this means is a choice; diagnoses and medication is available on the NHS if you're willing to wait a couple of years. Or you can go private and get a diagnosis in reasonably good time, but at a cost of up to a thousand pounds. For most people, that's simply out of reach – I need to have a conversation with my VA about whether the additional content creativity I'd get dosed out on my eyeballs on Adderall will bring in more money than the cost of getting it. It's hard to say, especially as I don't know what effect it'll have on me anyway; I'd be loath to spend that amount of money on something that doesn't work. What I need, really, is a parent with an ADHD-diagnosed child who can, er, slip me some surreptitiously. Which is, of course, illegal, so I'm not going to condone this. Here in the UK, Adderall is regarded as an amphetamine-derived product and therefore listed as a class B drug, "The maximum penalty for unauthorized possession is five years in prison and an unlimited fine. The maximum penalty for illegal supply is 14 years in prison and an unlimited fine.", and I cannot, of course, advocate any of my friends being caught breaking the law just to satisfy my scientific curiosity.

The line between Lawful Good and Chaotic Good is quite a nebulous one.

Anyway.

The full list of symptoms and whatnot for all of these neurodiversity issues I believe I have is out of scope for this podcast; just be aware that anyone who's met me is pretty sure of my qualifications within a handful of minutes. The rationale behind this podcast episode is about my coming to terms with them and how I reacted to them. But what I want to do is give a bit of background.

See, when I was a child, neurodiversity didn't exist. ADHD just wasn't "A Thing". You just had 'hyperactive kids' and 'naughty kids' and 'lazy kids'. I don't know if it was a fear in society of personal expression, or a belief amongst schools and parents that if you were 'awkward' then that was a failing on their part, or if it was just a desire, nay, a need, for conformity – in the same way that Victorian schoolchildren were forced to write with their right hand because 'that was the way it was done' – but there was far less tolerance and time for 'natural variation' than there is now. Children like us were branded as 'difficult' and therefore had to be controlled, punished for transgressions, left open to criticism from our peers.

In addition, I was the archetypal 'Gifted Kid'. Not child genius standard, but certainly pushing well above my weight (I was in my primary school's chess team, for enby's sake. That a state-run primary school within the boundaries of Liverpool city council *had* a chess team is Billy Elliot levels of cultural optimism, but there we go). Partly because of this, and partly because my grandmother had delusions of grandeur, I went to a privately-educated secondary school with the general expectation it would keep me rising, as opposed to having my head shoved down a flushing toilet at the local comprehensive cos I'd be the loner nerd (which probably also means my grandmother knew nothing about private schools. But maybe being pegged is acceptable if the pegger talks to you in Latin while he does so. "Penetrabo te in culus" as they don't say in Rome, but possibly in Eton or Harrow). However I quickly saw a flaw in the plan. I knew that to be consistently up with the best, I'd have to

work hard (and probably fail) at things I wasn't interested in and had no aptitude for. And let's be honest, I didn't like failing, even then. I mean, who does?

There was another problem, and with hindsight one more pertinent to this podcast episode. The reason I was seen as a 'gifted kid' was because, compared to my peer group, I was quite a 'high flyer'. My 'reading age' was pretty above average and in English lessons the teacher just used to let me get on with reading so she could concentrate on the other kids who needed more help. My maths skills were also much higher than the rest of the class, and so I 'stood out' to my teachers. It appeared that I found things 'too easy'. The problem came when things got 'hard'. Because I was so used to being ahead of the game, that expectation was set that I would always be that way, whereas in truth I just ... I guess I developed quickly (which is odd considering I was one of the youngest in the school year). So when things got harder, in early teens, when I had to work more, I suddenly found myself slipping down, failing, and not understanding why, not quite grasping how everyone else was able to do things without apparent difficulty and I, who had never been ... 'taught' how to ask for help, suddenly found myself in a position where I truly believed I just wasn't very good at anything, and that my entire childhood had been a lie, and that I had been, effectively, an imposter.

These issues combined in my, evidently highly logical but slightly warped, teenage brain and I concluded the only safe solution was to be consistently average. To be middle ranking. To not excel at anything lest I be expected to excel at everything, and fail. And, being honest, have to do more work than I felt comfortable with. And yet also not coming 'bottom' at anything and revealing myself to be the failure that I undoubtedly was. Did it work? I mean, I achieved everything I wanted to, but it probably changed my entire work ethic. Knowing that you can achieve more but not seeing the point, because being average is good enough, it doesn't set expectations, and makes you less likely to be seen to fail.

And of course now, success scares me. Because I'm not used to it, because I still do everything 'averagely'; I still only do 'just enough to get by', and I know one day someone will finally notice I'm not as good as they think, or that I'm not trying.

In the last couple of years I learned that Imposter Syndrome is very common amongst Gifted Kids, especially those with ADHD. Mh. And in related news, I have always found it very hard to take up a new hobby, or learn something different, because in my head I want to be good at it. And good at it immediately. If I'm not good at it, I fiddle a bit & then give up on it. Partly it's because I don't want (want?) to expend the effort on learning, if I feel I won't be very good at it regardless, because I don't want to commit to something I'll fail at. So consequently, I end up doing very little. It just feels like a waste of time, money, and resources to even try, most of the time.

It's why, despite my best intentions, I can't speak Spanish, nor why my fantasy adventure novel has ever been completed. To be precise, it's a problem of self-development and motivation. Essentially, it's accountability. Like, without someone pushing me to do it, it becomes one of those things that I just let lie. I give up on. Because shinier and easier things appear in my life, things that require less effort, but also less risk - the ability to fail to speak Spanish is quite high, and therefore my brain would rather do something that's easier, less taxing on the brain, and something that doesn't require effort. Like Twitter, or reading endless Wikipedia articles until 2.30am with about 14 tabs open because every time I see a blue link to something I don't know or want to know more about, I right-click it to open in a new tab. I have the same problem on the TV Tropes website, and is exactly the reason I've never been to Reddit. Because I know exactly what would happen if I did.

And, interestingly, the main reason there's large gaps in my podcast schedule. 46 episodes in 3 and a bit years, an average of an episode just over every 3½ weeks. When I started, I tried to do it weekly. That ... didn't last long at all. That said, it's notable that of all the things I've started in my life, this podcast is one of the few that I've persevered with, despite the gaps, despite my issues.

Someone else who has ADHD, but who was diagnosed at an early age because she's both younger and lives in a culture where it seems to be more attuned for, is my friend Dayna, who here talks about how it was picked up in her, and how it affects her in everyday life now.

{Dayna

So, I was diagnosed as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) back in the early 90s, because at the time ADD and

ADHD were under two different umbrellas. From what I understand, I think in the 2000s, ADD was squooshed under ADHD, and it's ADHD-Inattentive.

But I was diagnosed with ADD in the third grade. My teacher, Miss Thomas, had clued in my parents, as she'd seen several things in class. One thing in particular was oversharing, I don't remember this happening but my mother told me the story. Apparently round Christmas time we were all taking a test in class working quietly, I raise my hand, Miss Thomas thought I had a question, and no, I had a sudden urge to let her and the rest of my classmates know that my father had Santa on his boxers. So, yeh, she recommended to my parents that they might want to look into getting me tested, and I was, and then I got the diagnosis, and my mom said that was one of the best things that happened, because it explained so much about my behaviour, and it made things kinda easier for my parents at least to understand why I acted how I acted.

An example is 'choices from your heart', making a choice, a decision on something is incredibly hard. Still kinda is, I've gotten a lot better at it, but my mom, we'd be at the store, she'd be like 'you know what, you've been really good, you can have either a colouring book activity book, or a paper doll book. And I would literally have a crying meltdown in the middle of the store because I couldn't decide, the decision felt so big. And then of course because I was having a crying meltdown over picking out a book, my mom would just be like 'you know what, never mind, let's just go home'.

So it helped explain a lot of that for my parents which made my life a little bit easier when I was younger. I'm still sometimes coming to grips with having ADHD. When I'm in the middle of a meltdown, and I know when it's happening, I get very frustrated, I get very upset, and typically I start to cry, that's just how it goes. On top of being upset about being upset about whatever I'm upset about, I will then further get upset because logically I know the way I'm acting is ridiculous and over the top, and overblown, and it is not that big of a god-damn deal. And that then further pushes the meltdown because I'm also incredibly frustrated with myself. An example would be, I remember crying in the bathroom at work because me and my partner had plans to go to LARP (Live Action Role Playing) but he was like 'hey, there's this other cool thing happening Friday night, do we want to skip Friday LARP and go to this thing', and I had to make a decision and as I said, decisions are super-duper hard. So I'm crying at the bathroom at work over deciding whether or not to do something that is fun, and that I want to do. And then also crying over why is my brain so god-damn broken, I am so frustrated with myself over this.

And I've been working over the last few years on just accepting that my brain's not broken, my brain's never been broken, this is just how my brain is, this is how it came off the manufacturing floor. So it's been more of an acceptance thing with myself I would say the last 10 years or so, and it gets really frustrating talking to people, because I've been a lot more vocal about saying 'I'm ADHD, and this is the shit that comes with it', and then I'll get people like 'Oh that can't be right, you're not ADHD, I don't see XYZ', and it's like 'yeh, cos not all of us present that way, and that's okay, I don't have to fit a specific box to have my diagnosis, I have it, I've had it for like a long time, thirty-some-odd years, so yeh.

It's been my constant companion, and as much as I rebelled against it in my teens, I stopped taking medication for it in my sophomore year of High School, and I've mostly been off medication, I have my own coping mechanisms, I went on briefly in my early-thirties to deal with some work stuff, but had to stop because my blood pressure had taken a major spike and we were trying to rule out what was causing it, but I self-medicate with caffeine, so a cup of coffee in the morning, a cup of coffee in the afternoon, when I'm working, and it's manageable.

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It's interesting, by the way, that she says she self-medicates with caffeine. I've definitely heard several people not just say this, but indeed cite it in scientific research, and it makes sense as ADHD medication is often based on amphetamine, which is generally a stimulant, and caffeine has similar effects. It's always made me wonder if ADHD-like symptoms aren't in reality far more common than they seems to be, it's just the average population self-medicates with coffee without actually realising or knowing, and so they don't see there's anything amiss. I, unfortunately, hate coffee – the taste, the smell, the everything – and I've tended to avoid most caffeine-filled soft drinks these days (gone are the days when I'd have 3 500ml bottles of coca-cola a night when I was on nightshift in one of my first jobs in the firm I used to work for). Except Irn-Bru. This isn't just because I live in Scotland, by the way, I've always been fond of the stuff, but I do have it rarely – since I've been up here it's

been twice a week, whereas previously it was around twice a year.

I am fully aware that this feels like it's become a bit of a therapy session. In fact, on that note, I need to say that therapy, again this is a belief that was much more prevalent when I was growing up and it's much more accepted now, it's one of those things that always felt like something you only did if you'd 'failed', like, it was almost the last resort and if you were in therapy it meant you were pretty much 'mad as a hatter' or 'suicidal'. It just had a bad vibe about it.

Additionally of course there's the whole toxic masculinity aspect; men, especially, don't go to therapy anywhere near as much as they ought to because it's seen as 'weak' by their (our) peers; like if you admit to going to a therapist, you're seen as 'less of a man', and 'too emotional', not 'strong enough', and therefore obviously then the target of criticism and bullying from the patriarchy.

But I'd like to say on record now that more people should have therapy – especially men, as the more men who are allowed to think inwardly like this, the less they'll follow blindly the patriarchal society – , more people should have easy access to therapy, and society needs to accept that going to therapy should be as normal for your mental health needs as regular check-ups with your doctor should be for physical health needs. The powers that therapy provide are wonderful. I've had sessions with my therapist for almost exactly a year now, and while these days it does often feel like I'm 'checking-in' rather than having anything fundamental that needs to be discussed and worked through, I've only managed to get to that stage because I've had deep conversations with them about things that, I'll be honest, never occurred to me until they encouraged me to think about them. Certainly I'm a lot more self-confident – and people have noticed this – and I'm a lot more comfortable with who I am. Obviously there's things that will never truly be 'fixed', but the point is not to be perfect, the point is to know who you are enough so you know why and how to work with those experiences rather than be subsumed by them. Certainly now I'm a lot more in control of my feelings and my thoughts, and I understand myself much better than I did when I started, and all of this makes me a much happier and contented person in general.

Here's Kate-Frankie, from *This Could Lead To Anywhere*, talking about her experience of therapy and the advantages of being open about mental health.

{Kate-Frankie

I don't know whether we are at the stage of being open about mental health and it being something that doesn't have a stigma which is really upsetting. I think in the workplace in particular, you have to really think about whether you're going to disclose that. I do now, because I want that to be a culture that we have, but, it is really hard to be open about your mental health, and I think coming out with that piece of information which is part of who you are, so my anxiety for example is part of who I am, and it's what I've lived with for a lot of years now, I think that should be a second nature conversation, but it really isn't and it does hold a lot of people back.

I've worked with people who have mental health disorders and who struggle with it more than I do, and then I've worked with other people that potentially have something, or don't, but decide not to talk about it at all, and just steer clear of mental health conversations, and I think this is something that needs to change. I think with friends and with family it should be something that you can be open about, but again I know of a variety of different reactions, I suppose, to mental health conversations, so we're still not there as a society I don't think, and I really want to see people being open. I'm quite open even on social media, I'll talk about it at work, my family know, my friends are aware, and when I've tracked it back in therapy with a counsellor, I've dealt with anxiety since I was about eight years old, that I can remember, so it's definitely been a part of my life and it's something that because I know I can prepare, I can use coping strategies, I know the things that are gonna like really trigger me, I know what I need to deal with them positively, and I can catch myself if I am starting to feel really anxious and not deal with it well, and I can change that.

So I think being open actually can massively improve your mental health, and the way that you deal with the more negative days that you can have, and everyone has mental health, so that's the kind of thing, if it was physical health, if it was that you were feeling really run down, or ,say you broke your leg, it's that thing of you would always go and get checked out, but we just don't have the same reaction or thing built into our culture around mental health that we need to take care of that just as much.

But I really want to get to a point where we are much more open and people can come out about their mental health and talk about the times that are much more difficult, and collectively as a society move on, move forward, and move more positively to a place where this is not a barrier and where there isn't stigma.

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Therapy can't really assist with the practical aspects of neurodiversity, though it does provide a 'vent' through which you can learn about how they affect you. One way it does this is encourage you to 'join the dots', to remember all manner of different things both past and present, and make the connections between them because everything is all in one place, one conversation. And in a sense that's what I do on these pods, on my blogs, and especially when talking to friends just as much as, if not more than, with my therapist.

One such aspect here is dyspraxia. And since it's Dyspraxia Week, this seems a good time to talk about it. It's something you already know about me, but I want to talk here about how things in my background now make sense given what I know now.

But first, what is dyspraxia. Well it's a word derived from the Greek 'ill/bad activity', and is the shorthand for a condition known as "Developmental Coordination Disorder" (DCD). Simply put, it's a condition where the messages sent by the brain to the rest of the body – especially with regard to information around location and movement (known as 'motor functions') – are (in computer parlance) sometimes 'corrupted'. A bit like seeing a pixellated image rather than a high-res one. It's believed that around 5-6% of the population are affected by it, though as it's commonly only picked up in childhood that figure might be higher.

The upshot of this is the dyspraxic often has issues defining their place in spacetime – we lack much spacial awareness. Which is a very fancy way of saying they bump into things. And that's often as far as people assume dyspraxia goes – in fact one word often used to dismiss dyspraxia is 'clumsiness', and that's exactly how it was described when I was a child; it wasn't a fancy neurological condition, it was just all my fault for not paying attention.

Ah, if only it were that simple.

See, it's much more than bumping and tripping, although my issues around that are, uhm, very well attested, to the point even I'm surprised my little toes are still ... attached, never mind functional. As dyspraxia concerns motor functions, pretty much anything that involves movement is something we struggle with, to a greater or lesser degree. For me, personally, with hindsight anyway, dyspraxia is the prime reason I can neither drive nor ride a bike. The latter is largely a combination of not being able to balance properly on it, coupled with my brain not being able to register how to move my feet on the pedals at the same time. A friend of mine tried to teach me to ride a bike a few years back, as I said it would be really useful for me to learn for while I was travelling – you know, hiring a bike to go exploring around the local area or large historic sites etc. After forty minutes she had to give up because she was laughing too much. And to be honest, I kind of have to laugh along with it, otherwise it would frustrate me immensely.

The former, driving, though, is a lot more serious. I took driving lessons in my mid-20s, at the behest of my then girlfriend, but I found them really difficult. In total I must have had maybe 40 or 50; I was close to being put forward for my driving test but I just realised I wasn't confident I was ... safe? There was one incident I remember where I looked in my mirrors to pull out onto a major road, saw nothing coming, so moved. And nearly hit a car in that lane which, as far as my brain was concerned, had materialised out of nowhere. Another time I was waiting in a filter lane to turn right, crossing traffic, and it took me far longer than it needed to because I couldn't easily judge how fast the cars coming at me were going, or how far away they were, so I stayed waiting until the road was free. Despite the fact I could see quite a long way down the road. I didn't realise it then, but both those issues are classic dyspraxia.

We also have trouble following directions for things like dance moves or building furniture, in my case especially if those instructions are drawings on paper. I have to watch someone do them first, and even then slowly, and repeatedly, until they work for me. Unfortunately my probable ADHD means I find it hard to concentrate long enough when I have to do this, so I end up giving up; YouTube is not my friend. Case in point: the first time I put up my new camping tent in preparation for my Big Hike was a complete disaster. In

addition, there's a festival I often volunteer at that has dance workshops, everything from Charleston to Zumba, Bollywood to Capoeira. The only one I found that I had any capability for was Bollywood, because it was the only one that didn't involve too many quick and sudden movements; I had time to process what was going on and 'see' where all my limbs needed to go. As a side note, this all also has implications in other aspects of my life, including an inability to wield rope. Full Swap Radio listeners will now understand why I definitely describe myself as a bunny and not a rigger.

Many people with dyspraxia have terrible handwriting. I'm on record as saying there's no point in learning cursive writing outside of artistic endeavour, because it's illogical to have writing that takes time to process and read. I wonder how much of that is my own dyspraxia not being able to distinguish where the letters are; certainly when I write I have to do so in printed letters because otherwise it's completely illegible (as opposed to partially illegible) – giving me blank paper is a recipe for slanted sentences. This was the case even growing up – the teachers at my primary school gave up insisting I wrote in cursive when faced with it.

I prefer to type than write. Even in the 1990s when I had many penpals, I had a tendency to type my letters on my computer rather than write them out my hand. Partly this was because I type quicker than I write, but a large part of it was because I knew my writing wasn't particularly legible, and writing for long periods also hurt the muscle on my palm, just below my thumb. My research into dyspraxia also suggests that people with the condition tend to hold their pens 'incorrectly', something I was always pulled up for at school; this may be related.

And obviously classic art is out of the question. I once tried to draw a spider falling off a table; my schoolfriends suggested it looked more like a lorry or truck having run over something that, given it had been run over by a truck, was more-or-less unidentifiable.

Another issue I had at school that, with hindsight, should have been an indicator of dyspraxia was during maths lessons. Now, mathematics was one of my better subjects, but I never managed to get a handle on geometry. This includes things like rotation and reflection of shapes, but also creating/building them from drawings. For instance, those 'here's a skeleton of a cube drawn on this piece of paper, and here's a line on one of the squares that make the cube up. What square does the line go on to if the cube was built?' type questions. I have to physically build the cube to answer that; I cannot visualise the shape in three dimensions. It's the same with any kind of layout – I find it hard to 'see' in my mind what something looks like for real if it's drawn. Indeed even in the real world I find it hard to judge where anything is if I can't see it, including the layout of my own flat. I had to physically walk through my house and stand at various points to work out what was the other side of my bedroom walls because I couldn't do it in my head. Even then I still have trouble working out how each room faces in the direction it does without literally being in it. And I've no chance with visualising the neighbouring flats. I don't have 'vision' to create and manipulate objects in 3-dimensions in my mind.

There's also the issue with sports. I can run, but that's about it. I have trouble doing any sport that requires any degree of co-ordination. I mean, I can catch a ball, sure, and I can kick one, but that's about my limit. I can't easily judge *where* I'm hitting/kicking a ball, nor how far I need to make it go. Golf is completely off my radar. And if I have to do something more complicated than simply releasing it, I kind of fall apart; pretty much anything from javelin to cricket, field hockey to table tennis. It's fun for the audience to watch, at least. And of course even running events have to be flat – I tried the 3,000m steeplechase a couple of times at school, but had to stop and step over every barrier because I simply couldn't judge its height to jump it. That said, in one of the races I still finished third out of five, a lap behind second and a lap ahead of fourth.

It was a very niche event.

Anyway, all of these points I only realised in hindsight. I'd never heard the word dyspraxia until, on my Hike Across Great Britain in summer of 2019, I was chatting with one of my hiking partner Becky's friends about my trials and tribulations both on the hike and in general, and she wondered if I was dyspraxic. I didn't know, but when I did some research on it a few days later and told Becky what the symptoms were, she burst into laughter at the third one and said to me I probably didn't need to read any further. You can see a theme developing here.

Given that I've never been diagnosed with dyspraxia, and indeed had never heard of the word until two years ago, you might wonder how I've coped with what from the outside appears to be a combination of clumsiness

and a lack of attention. Well, I've developed 'masking' strategies to deal with it. These include having to concentrate very hard when doing something requiring careful movement. The trouble is this tends to make me more tired and irritable, so I enjoy it less. I've had this happen a couple of times when hiking, when a combination of terrain and weather has meant I've had to think so hard about each footstep that I've not liked the hike itself. Related to this, I've also had issues going down hills, because I'm so acutely aware of tripping over my own feet, tripping over the edge of the hill, or just gravity taking its toll and me rolling down, I go down hills very very slowly, which is awkward when you're hiking the Pennine Way.

Most of the time though, my strategies for dealing with dyspraxia are to avoid situations where issues might occur - for example not driving/cycling, nor putting myself into situations where I'm reliant on movement or following pictorial instructions for the safety of myself or others - I'm very scared of the duties of being in the exit row seats on aeroplanes, even though I try to take them wherever possible for the legroom. It's also about making sure I have enough space around me to move comfortably without fear of impacts, although I'm not at the stage yet of covering my table legs with padding. You might be more responsible. I also avoid using dangerous implements, and I get other people to, eg, do my DIY (my friends know better than to let me use power tools, especially saws and drills).

You'd have thought wearing shoes would be a good way to prevent many dyspraxia-related incidents. You'd be right.

The problem with dyspraxia in a medical sense is, unlike other aspects of neurodiversity (most notably ADHD), dyspraxia isn't something you can deal with through medication. There isn't a magic pill that suddenly gives you a +4 to perception, although interestingly it's believed some 50% of dyspraxics do have ADHD.

This makes it, certainly at my age, less ... important to get a diagnosis since there isn't a great deal anyone can do about it. It simply becomes one of the 'give me three interesting facts about yourself', and even then because it's a lesser-understood neurological condition, people either look at you strangely or they dismiss you as per earlier comments. I can see it helping children, since it then becomes a concept they can give to schoolteachers etc to ensure a safer and more understanding classroom ('oh, Billy, I don't think you should be climbing that 'A'-frame', 'oh Sue yes I'll give you extra time on your Maths homework '), but in an adult environment it just becomes one of self-awareness and self-mitigation.

Anyway. Dyspraxia, in conclusion, is a condition that affects movement and spacial awareness, and whose symptoms have a knock-on effect in everyday life. It is a disability in terms of it affects your 'ability' to do things, but as with many of these conditions, knowledge is power, and an awareness of what you're capable and not capable of is a great first step to managing it. It's a part of who I am, and I've learned the best way of coping is to treat it with good humour, to make jokes about it, to take ownership of it as it were. It's something I'm always aware of, but I don't let it stop me doing the things I like to do, you know, like hiking barefoot over Kinder Scout. I'm just acutely aware of the dangers it brings. Like ... breaking my toes.

Masking and mitigation, be it for dyspraxia, ADHD, autism, or any other neurodiversity, is something that's long-developed and hard to get past, but also sometimes necessary. Here's Kira again, talking about how they have 'masks', both willingly and unwillingly, that are a part of their autism.

{Kira Mental Health 2

I think the hardest part of it all is learning to unmask. Learning to no longer be who people told you you should be or what they told you you should be, but trying to be yourself and trying to take the mask off, and when you've had it for such a long time like I have, because as I say autism is something you're born with, it doesn't just appear and it doesn't just go away, I've obviously been indoctrinated since day one to not behave like that, and then there are obvious signs from my childhood, like when I was a baby I used to love sitting in a bouncer chair and I would bounce up and down and rip up paper and only watch adverts, I couldn't watch TV shows, but I could watch adverts cos they were short and bright and flashy, like that's an obvious sign right there, but again back in the 90s, wasn't such a big thing.

So yeh, I'd say the hardest part of it is trying to come to terms with the fact you have to unmask, you have to let shit go, and you have to try to almost rediscover yourself. I'm still learning now, I'm still learning now and I'm still trying to be somewhat acceptable and when I can and can't be myself, if you will. Anything to do with my

daughter I've got to put on that mask, I've got to be the presentable mum and all that kind of thing, when really all I want to do is scream and shout and get out of the sports hall because it's too crowded and I can hear somebody breathing and it's just irritating me but you can't do that.

So yeh, it's kind of having to learn to mask in society but not around your home life and stuff like that, it can be very difficult. I'm still coming to terms with it myself. I've had a lot of people doubt me as well; I've had a lot of people go 'that's not autism, you're not autistic, if you were they would have found out by now, well everyone's a little bit autistic aren't they?' No. No they're not. No. No. That's not how it works. No. It's hard, but I promise you it gets a lot better, it gets a lot better when you start to accept yourself for who you are rather than pretending to be somebody else.

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While I've spoken a bit about how I've realised my neurodiversities, and how I cope with them, what I do want to talk a little about before I finish this episode is more about the specific concept of 'coming out' with them, both to myself and to other people. It's one thing to realise what you are, but it's a whole different kettle of onions to accept it.

Dyspraxia is a bit of an odd one in the sense that, as I say, I discovered the word so late in life that I never had any negative associations with it, nor any pre-conceived ideas about it. 'Coming Out' to myself as a dyspraxic was actually pretty easy – it was simply realising there was a word that existed that accurately described how I felt, or, more accurately I guess, how I acted. I didn't feel I had to do any mental gymnastics or soul-searching to accept the word or the description. In fact, it was quite gratifying to know that the issues I had weren't just me, and that I wasn't just ... I never described my inabilities in a negative way, I always took them as being a part of me, one of those things that made me quirky, but I did worry that maybe there was something 'wrong' with me, that I was missing ... something that pretty much everyone else had. Like that whole 'previously gifted kid' thing, as if there was something I hadn't been taught, or paying attention to when everyone else was, well, learning to to move, I guess, that meant that everyone else suddenly jumped ahead of me in terms of abilities and intelligence. But knowing that it wasn't just me, that enough other people had the same issues, the same ... disabilities ... made me more able to talk about it in a way that other people had a reference point for.

Writing that paragraph has made me wonder if dyspraxia is an inability or a disability, and to be honest I still don't really know. Like, I have an inability to do things that other people can do, not just easily, but as an everyday thing that they don't even need to think about, but does that make me ... disabled? Maybe it's the same thing as needing glasses – technically I require an aid to help me function to a standard level in society, in the same way people with mobility issues need sticks or wheelchairs, but I wouldn't call people who wear glasses 'disabled'. Maybe it's a societal/cultural thing. The UK's Equality Act 2010 defines being disabled as 'if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative affect on your ability to do normal daily activities'. It would never occur to me to tick the box on forms asking 'do you have a disability', but does my dyspraxia have a substantial negative effect? It's certainly provable it's long-term. Does my ADHD? Does it matter if I'm not diagnosed with either? I'd be very reluctant to because neither are what I would traditionally think of when I imagine 'disability', but is that my 'bad'? Should I? Is part of my 'coming out' with neurodiverse issues to 'come out' as disabled? This is a very weird thought and I may have to ponder this for a while. I don't know how I feel about this.

ADHD itself is a whole different barrel of dynamite, simply because of the negative associations. People think they know what ADHD is, what it looks like, and it's never really looked on in accurate or gentle terms. I have a couple of decades of baggage in my own mind about it, because that's just the way cultural portrayals, representations of, and references to it have been throughout my life. So when it comes to my own 'coming out' to myself with the possibility ... let me admit something. Back in 2004, I started dating a friend of mine; it was a long-distance relationship (she is American, and in fact you heard from her earlier!). Anyway, one of the first things she said to me when we met was 'oh, by the way, I have ADHD'. And my first instant thought was 'oh, that means she's a bit weird, that means this is going to be hard.' In fact I did seem to think of it then, not as a mental disability, but certainly as a bit of a dysfunction, a 'something is wrong with this woman, how will this affect our relationship, will I cope with it well?'. Of course, it turns out that it was absolutely fine and I genuinely never noticed. And with hindsight there may have been reasons for my not noticing, of course.

Obviously the more I learned about what ADHD was and what it wasn't, the more I realised that it wasn't

something weird and scary, but in fact perfectly normal. Indeed, rather too normal. So by the time my Instagram Explore tab was full of memes that were screenshots from Tumblr about ADHD, and I was finding them all relatable, I was probably pretty much accepting of the likelihood of it. How did that make me feel? Honestly, I don't really know; I don't really remember there being a 'tipping point', a moment where I felt 'ah, well, that's what it is then', it was just a gradual realisation and acceptance. I don't think I ever 'came out' to myself as ADHD, it just ... kind of happened slowly. Once I knew and understood, and felt connected to the term, I was more than happy to run with it, as even if I'd never been diagnosed, it was the simplest and easiest reference point to describe the way I was. I was like 'you know what ADHD is? I'm kinda like that'. It made myself easier to explain. Especially to myself.

I would talk about 'coming out' to other people, but I kind of ... never did? Not properly. I never sat down with my parents or friends and said 'I have something to tell you'. With dyspraxia it's a bit harder because fewer people know what it means, but with ADHD it's more like ... maybe I never felt I needed to, because by the time I realised that was what I was, it ... didn't matter as much? Most people I knew, had known me for so long and knew my habits that it probably wouldn't have made any difference to them - indeed they may already have guessed themselves, if they'd done any research about it independently. And certainly at least one of my friends have said I was the poster child for ADHD, so, you know. I've put both in my social media bios, and I've certainly referred to both in status updates etc, but I've never had a dedicated discussion about it.

Well, until now I guess. And I know my mother listens to my pods

{standard section separation jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me next time when I talk more about the subject of 'coming out', but then it'll be the more traditional definition, all about 'coming out to yourself' around sexual and gender orientations. Until then, protect your toes because they're very important, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}