Callum McCrosson, 26, was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome when he was 23. He has also experienced life with a mental health issue as a teenager that left him isolated.

Ten years after he first experienced panic attacks that manifested as stomach cramps and muscular contractions, he developed a mental health issue he now feels was “mostly caused by being autistic and not being aware of it.”

Having received a diagnosis, Callum says he has “changed almost entirely” and that he is much happier with “a network of friends that I want and not that I thought I should have.”

The National Autistic Society revealed in You Need To Know, a 2010 study that focused on the lives of children in Great Britain who have autism as well as mental health issues, 71% of all children with autism also have one mental health issue at least and 42% have multiple issues (see appendix 1).

Callum shared his experiences of living with autism and mental health issues at the recent NAS Autism and mental health conference, held in Manchester on Tuesday 17th June 2014 (2).

Callum’s experience

On dealing with teenage desires as a 13-year-old, Callum says: “I was of the age where I desired attention from girls and male friends, all for the first time. I had no idea how to do it and my attempts must have come across clumsily. As a result I was made fun of, or ignored.

“I withdrew more and more until I was missing more than half the school year.

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“I got diagnosed with depression at 15 and started medication and therapy. I was repeatedly told it was simple to snap out of it, to exercise or to just make friends! That didn’t work. I settled into a pattern of ups and downs. Having a friend or two and then having none for extended periods of time.”

While he struggled to find friends who he could share his situation with, Callum also struggled to find employment.

Working with Prospects Scotland (3), an NAS service that looks to help people with autism to develop employability skills, changed his outlook on life and built confidence.

After being diagnosed with autism by a new psychiatrist who saw traits of autism as she was also a specialist who worked with children on the spectrum, Callum became comfortable with himself. He can now embrace the present, while making sense of his past.

He says: “I was supported into accepting that it is absolutely okay to be me.

“I have a network of people close to me who are fully aware of my issues. This has allowed me to be a lot happier.

“One of the big things that happened after I got diagnosed was I could eventually relax. I could stop beating myself up about embarrassing incidents that happened when I was a teenager as a lot of them were fairly typical behaviours for someone on the spectrum.

“It’s hard to describe how I felt when I was really depressed outside of using clichéd terms of hopeless, lost and frustrated. There was no motivation to do anything and my life became very short term. I wasn’t making plans for further away than the next day. No thoughts about a career, marriage or kids.”

Embracing mindfulness

Lynne Moxon, a consultant psychologist from Education and Services for People with Autism Limited (ESPA), also spoke at the conference to share ways of how people who live with autism and mental health issues can create positive wellbeing with ease.

Lynne believes: “If anxiety in autism is often about difficulties and challenges with coping with uncertainty, novelty and change, then resilience, social understanding and emotional regulation could be improved by enabling people with autism to cope with and enjoy change.”
As a consultant psychologist who spoke in Manchester about developing and applying a positive mind set that can create a positive sense of wellbeing in anybody who lives with a mental health issue, Lynne believes a new way of thinking can make a big difference.

Two tips from Lynne can particularly help in mindfulness training. By applying them, stress levels can be reduced:

“Fill a sink or basin with warm water and washing up liquid. As you are doing this, focus on the activity. We might do this by noticing the temperature of the water and how it feels on your skin. The sound of the water as we move our hands through the water. The shape, colour and movement of the bubbles in our hands.

“Take a walk in the park. We might do this by noticing the wind on your cheeks, the sun warming your skin, the roughness of the bark on the trees. As you are walking along, describe what else you can feel, smell, see and hear.”

Conclusion

Autism and mental health issues are linked but as Callum’s story shows, a positive life can come from a negative experience. Lynne’s tips offer a way to take small steps in slowly building a better future.

Appendices

