

Autism and Sleep

Autism and Sleep - My experience.

'Bad sleeper.' That is the first thing that comes out of my parents' mouths whenever I ask what I was like as a child. My mum will compulsively go on to tell stories of nights spent persuading me to go back to bed. I think she's still traumatised. 'We tried everything,' she says, a glazed look in her eyes. 'Bedtime routines, leaving you to cry, picking you up... nothing worked. And you would argue constantly. Once you told me that it was unfair because you had to go to bed on your own, whereas I had daddy.' I ask how old I was when I said that. 'Three,' she replies, a slight growl in her voice. I'm not sure if this was a legitimate concern to my three-year-old self or whether I was just making up excuses not to go to bed. Both are entirely possible.



Discussion of my sleeping habits, or lack of them, came up fairly early on during my assessment for autism as an adult. 'Was there any time during her childhood that you thought Emma might be developmentally different to other children?' the doctor asked my mum. 'Yes,' she replied. The glazed look was back. 'She wouldn't go to sleep. She refused. One night when it was particularly bad I did wonder if there was something about her brain that was different. I remember feeling that something wasn't... "normal".' I feel for her. I know how hard it is to try to get me to sleep. I've been continuing the struggle myself.

It's been a couple of years since I was diagnosed and learning about autism has shed some light on my difficulties with sleep. Partly, for me at least, it's a problem with transitions. It's a wrench to go from the daytime busyness of activity to the stillness and unconsciousness of sleep. It feels like an abrupt change, even if I've been 'winding down' before bed. My brain is so busy, even while relaxing, that to suddenly 'switch off' seems bizarre, almost frightening. While learning about autism hasn't changed that feeling, I have discovered that being instructive with myself is helpful. It occurred to me, lying in bed one night, that I'd 'forgotten' that I was meant to be going to sleep. I contemplated whether this was something to do with my autie brain. I often forget to do things that

other people remember naturally (eating, drinking, brushing my teeth). 'Now it's time to go to sleep,' I told myself. To my amazement, the simple acknowledgement was enough to help with the transition. It's as if my brain went, 'Oh right! Thanks for the reminder.' and clocked off.

The 'busy brain' phenomenon is, I'm sure, closely linked with sensory overload. I experience the world very intensely and as a result, my brain is always processing something. Usually 27 things. The in-tray fills up because my brain takes in way more information than 1. It needs to, and 2. It can process in real-time, and the left-overs get sifted through when there's less sensory input. At night. When I'm trying to sleep.



It therefore seems sensible to take moments throughout the day to sit and breathe and allow your mind to slow down. Easier said than done for a multitude of reasons but it's nevertheless helpful if you can work it into your schedule. Reducing input before bed has been similarly useful. During a particularly bad period of sleep a few years ago, before I even had my diagnosis, my therapist suggested that I needed to learn how to self-soothe before bed. This was a term I'd only heard in reference to babies, but from my mum's stories and my own experiences of getting myself to sleep as an adult, it sounded very much like I'd never mastered self-soothing as a baby or... well, ever. So, for a few months I had a bath every single night. I wrote in a journal (an invaluable tool for me in working out how I feel) and then went to bed with some familiar audio playing quietly (my 'Friends' box set with the screen turned off). With perseverance, this routine improved my relationship with getting to sleep, as did reframing the way I view sleep itself.

I find it hard to love the idea of sleep. Aside from my difficulties falling asleep (and I consider myself lucky that, for the most part, I don't also have difficulties staying asleep) it seems like such a pointless waste of time. I know that we 'have' to sleep, but that's what it is to me – a duty. My brother, who, as a child, would frequently take himself off to sleep while my parents wrestled with me downstairs, says that he 'loves' sleeping. 'How can you love something that you're unconscious for?' I ask, annoyed at this nonsensical claim. He just shrugs.

While I will never understand his outlook on sleep, I have somewhat made my peace with it. Once I reasoned with myself that it is, after all, biologically necessary, and that I feel horrendous if I don't get enough sleep, I grudgingly began to accept its permanent place in my life. Making an enjoyable bedtime routine helped. I don't know why making it pleasurable had never occurred to me before, but now there are certain things (like listening to the Harry Potter audiobooks and wearing my comfiest pyjamas) that I allow myself to do only in bed so I really look forward to them. Plus, I now live with my boyfriend, which means I don't have to go to bed alone anymore. I think my three-year-old self would be happy.

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If you need help looking for services for an individual with an autism spectrum condition, we can help. Click below for the Autism Placement Support Service.

