

# How Are You Doing? A Check-In On Our Mental Health

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BY: PATRICK GALE & RUSSEL HOUSER

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# Early Journey Towards Mental Health

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- **Russel:** My experiences with mental health first related to my journey with fitting in with my peers, and in learning how to succeed in school.
  - I was diagnosed on the autism spectrum at three years old, and my support services were more focused on skill development.
- **Patrick:** I was diagnosed with ASD at the age of five years old. Depression runs in my family, so I learned coping skills at a young age.

# What Kind of Plan Have You Got?

- **Patrick:** Everyone has dealt with toxic situations at some point in their lives.
- The important thing is to have a plan to either remove yourself from those situations OR alleviate the stress of the situation if it is unavoidable.
- Many individuals on the autism spectrum struggle with formulating a plan.
- Mental illness is often a result of staying in a toxic situation and having the thought there is no escape. This has serious consequences.



# You Could Be Home, But You're Not

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- **Patrick:** Social situations are different for autistic people, so moving away to college and living on campus can be quite stressful and FAR out of one's comfort zone.
- Russel and I both chose to live on campus mostly because a commute from our respective family homes would not have been feasible.
- Speaking from experience, my life at home was toxic at times, so I discovered that this major change was beneficial for me.
- Autistic people tend to struggle juggling multiple tasks at one time. It's okay to slow down or even take an extended break.

# Learning Self-Advocacy

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- **Russel:** As I became older, I became a better self-advocate.
  - I had to work more on my social and communication skills in order to make and keep friendships.
- Learning how to advocate for your own needs is a crucial life skill.
  - Requesting help on something, or asking questions for clarification.
  - Letting someone know if you are feeling upset or not satisfied with something in your life.
  - Getting someone's attention.
  - Responding to personal feelings.



# It's Okay to Not Be Okay

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- **Patrick:** It is very unfortunate, but some people feel trapped in their toxic situation and do the unthinkable.....commit suicide.
- I went through a period starting my spring semester of college where my coursework was becoming more challenging and I felt trapped.
- I had frequent thoughts of suicide for eight months before surrendering (that's what it felt like at the time) and going to the emergency room for help.
- Moral of the story: never ignore a toxic situation of any kind, whether it be one you can remove yourself from or one you are forced to stay in. If you're forced to stay in, form a plan to make it less stressful.

# What Kind of Love Have You Got? (Part 1)

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- **Patrick:** A common stereotype is that autistic people lack empathy.
- Our reactions to certain situations are often viewed as a lack of empathy because we either cannot comprehend the situation OR we cannot relate to it directly.
- Unfortunately, we may blurt out something inappropriate as a result leading others to further believe we lack empathy. This happens because the situation makes us feel uncomfortable and trapped.
- What would you say to someone in an uncomfortable situation where he or she may lack empathy?



# What Kind of Love Have You Got? (Part 2)

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- **Patrick:** We mentioned previously that autistic people are often thought to lack empathy.
- Autistic people have their own ways to demonstrate empathy.
- For example, I demonstrate empathy through poetry. My mother passed away when I was 14 and she has inspired so many poems I have written.
- Reminder: empathy isn't just "feeling sad when someone else is sad".
  - It applies to all emotions, both positive and negative.

# The Influence of Thoughts over Actions and Feelings

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- **Russel:** Over time, I become more aware of the power of my own thoughts.
  - I learned how much one's personal thoughts influence their feelings.
- The messages you tell yourself can affect your feelings, and your actions.
  - For many autistic people, it can be difficult to remain positive after facing personal or environmental barriers in their daily lives.
  - Mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, or depression can surface over time.
  - However, recognizing and looking for the good in various situations can be helpful.
  - Awareness of one's thoughts and making a habit of thinking positively is key.

# Masking (Such An Easy Part and You Know How to Play It So Well)

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- **Patrick:** Masking is making the effort to appear “normal”.
- Some autistic people feel this is necessary to fit in with certain social groups.
- We shouldn't be afraid to hide who we are.
- My biggest inspiration to become an autism advocate has said that autistic people should grow INTO it rather than grow out of it.
- This means we can use our autistic traits to our advantage.



# Transitioning into Adolescence

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- **Russel:** Adjusting to high school is hard for many autistic teenagers.
  - Physical School Layout
  - Class Schedule and Expectations
  - Changes in Social Norms
  - Relationships w/ Peers
  - Relationships w/ Authority Figures
  - Romantic Relationships (if applicable)
- In my case, I also faced a difficult transition.
  - I was very worried about my grades, social life, and future.
  - As a result, I developed anxiety and low self-esteem.



# Some People Never Come Clean

- **Patrick:** Unfortunately, there is still a stigma surrounding mental health (autism, in particular). There's well-known cliché "It's okay to not be okay". When victims of mental illness are at a low point, they tend to forget this and it can have consequences.
- Having a support system is very important. Consider who you interact with and trust the most in your life.
- Some things are better to write in a journal and share with a professional therapist. Not everyone is comfortable with topics like suicide, substance abuse, or self-harm, but they are very real.
- Always be transparent with your therapist. Be as specific as you can with your experiences. Therapists can give the best feedback when you're transparent and specific. Example: instead of saying, "I feel depressed", say "I feel the most depressed at night when I'm trying to go to sleep".



# I Could Be Wrong, But I'm Not (No, I'm Not)

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- **Patrick:** Being wrong is an unpleasant feeling, but it's even more unpleasant when you're identifying a personal need that is being ignored.
- Many autistic people have trouble with maintaining high self-esteem.
- One method of boosting self esteem is to put yourself first and remove anything adding stress to your life that you have control over. This applies to personal and professional environments.
- A healthy work environment should give employees the freedom to voice their concerns and be receptive to feedback.
- Always remember to use "I" and "We" statements. Use the word "you" to a minimum as it implies aggressiveness.
- You control your life, not the people or company you work with.



# We're Not So Far Apart

- **Patrick:** There are many things that can trigger mental illness.
  - Living Arrangements
  - Work Situations
  - Certain Friend or Family Members
  - Geographical Setting
- Autistic people love a daily routine. If it is disrupted, it is a potential red flag. If you are having trouble identifying the cause of the problem, it is a good idea to discuss it with a therapist.
- A therapist will be able to assist in determining whether to confront the problem or to distance yourself away from it if possible (i.e. fight or flight).



# It's okay to get help....but first, you have to seek it.

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- **Russel:** In high school, I knew I needed help addressing my thoughts and feelings.
  - I met with a psychologist and my high school worker for counseling sessions.
  - My psychologist taught me how to become more self-aware of my emotions, and to actively look on the brighter side of various situations.
  - My social worker was an amazing source of constant support and reassurance. She always made sure that her office was accessible and inviting to visitors.
- There are many resources to help with various mental health issues.
  - The first step is often the hardest, but most important step to take.
  - Recognizing the need for help, and doing something about it.
  - We should feel comfortable in knowing when we are not feeling okay.
  - It is okay to seek help when you need it.

# Addressing the “Invisible Disability” in the Room

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- **Russel:** Thanks to the mental health supports I received in high school, I was empowered to improve my outlook on life.
- I realized that my own thoughts were holding me back.
  - I had to actively work on changing my thinking.
- I believe that for many people with disabilities, we also face another “invisible” disability.
  - This relates to negative outlooks on ourselves.
  - It takes hard but necessary work to address the messages we give ourselves while also facing external barriers we already face on a regular basis.



# Transitioning from Awareness to Acceptance

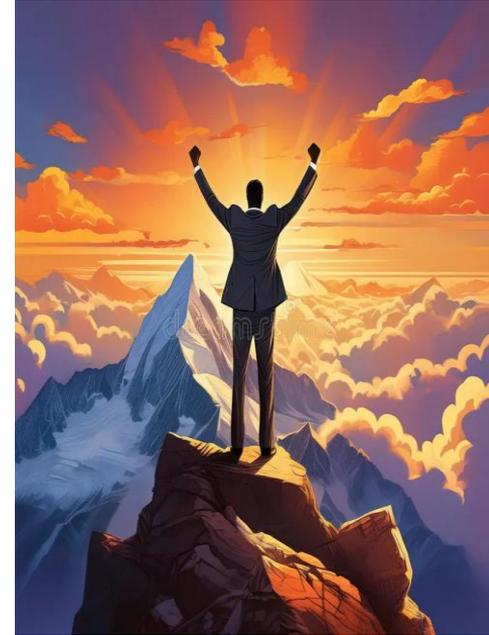
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- **Russel:** Eventually, I decided to become more open about my diagnosis.
  - My outlook on myself and the world became much more positive after receiving positive feedback from various friends, after I told them about being autistic.
  - It felt like a tremendous weight was lifted off my shoulders.
  - It was a relief to feel more like myself!
- Awareness is a great first step, but it is not enough.
  - Let's also work on promoting acceptance!
  - It may feel very difficult to be true to yourself and to other people.
  - I can tell you from personal experience that it is absolutely worth it.

# The Power of Changing One's Own Mindset

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- **Russel:** Over time, I grew more confident as I shared my life story.
  - I was amazed at how supportive others were of my disclosure.
  - Many people also shared their own life story with me!
- I still faced various challenges in my adulthood.
  - However, I have felt more empowered to identify and address my own thoughts and feelings. That has greatly helped me become more resilient to whatever obstacle is facing my way.
- We often talk about 'access' for people with disabilities.
  - We should include a more positive and self-confident mindset.
  - This helps with accessing opportunities in one's environment.



# Lessons Learned from Personal Life Story

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- You can start talking about mental health now. You don't have to wait until you absolutely need help, or that you are older, have more experience, etc.
- You probably know more about mental health than you think you do!
- Your thoughts can influence your feelings. They are shaped by your experiences, but they also can change your perception of them.
- Self-acceptance is a life journey, and it may have its challenges. However, in the long-run, it is absolutely worth it for one's own mental health and identity.
- The age-old saying...actions speak louder than words.
  - However, the words you tell yourself can influence the actions you take.

# How Can I Be an Advocate for Mental Health?

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- Allow the people you are supporting to have space to express themselves.
- Practice being open with discussing topics of mental health.
  - Yes, this goes with the phrase “Practice makes perfect”...
  - ...But this also helps others you know feel open to discuss them.
  - Consider your own comfort level and that of others.
- Encourage communication. Don't assume that it was already made.
- Empower others to be better self-advocates for themselves, and in helping them be advocates for others as needed.
- Most of all...take care of your own mental health too!

# Where to Find Us

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- Patrick: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/patrick-gale-408b168b/>

# Questions?

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