

Assert Newsletter

Winter 2019

Welcome to the Assert winter newsletter.

Assert Update

It's almost the Christmas holidays and Assert will be closing from Tuesday 24 December until Monday 6 January.

We are still in the process of recruiting for a Benefits Case Worker, so we appreciate your patience with this.

Jenna has started in her new role and it's amazing to have her on the team. Jenna will be running The Wellbeing Club, a new project with three types of support: read on for more info.

We are currently fundraising to generate income to help fund our Life Skills Project, so if you are able to donate any amount to Assert, this will go a long way in helping to sustain this area of our work. We are now in the initial stages of a Big Lottery bid to help with this longer term, but this process will take many months and it would be amazing to have some funding support from people prior to this progressing. Any donation, no matter how small, helps Assert. We are also still keen for people to do fundraising coffee mornings events; please email Cat if you would like one of the fundraising packs.

Staff and trustees would like to wish everyone Happy Christmas and look forward to seeing you in 2020.

Sarah Bourne

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New Short Course – Interoception (starting 2020)

At the beginning of this year I came across the less commonly known and understood sense called Interoception. As mentioned in the [Spring newsletter](#), this sense helps us feel and understand what's going on inside our body. It also allows us to feel emotions – because our various emotional states cause different sensations inside the body which are decoded and allow us to understand how we're feeling. For people who experience sensory processing issues, the brain may have difficulty making sense of that information and as a consequence find self-regulation a challenge. Current research suggests that some people with autism may not recognise these sensations in a typical way. If you'd like to find out more about how this sense works and explore strategies for how to increase interoceptive awareness, please contact me at lifeskills@assertbh.org.uk.

Julia Martinez

A word from Jenna

Since starting in October I have been doing a lot of organising for the new role of Autism Case Worker! This has included creating the Wellbeing Club. The Wellbeing Club aims to provide an overarching service for all our members to partake in. There are three parts of the Wellbeing Club; a Coffee Club to promote social wellbeing, an Active Club for more physical wellbeing and also the Support Sessions which aim to improve wellbeing through providing goal-orientated case work.

I am going to be holding the Coffee Club on the second and fourth Wednesday of the month, 14:00–16:00 at the Brighthelm Centre. I will be there for the whole two hours but you are welcome to come and go whenever you like. The Brighthelm Centre is a community space which is open as a café during the day so you will be able to buy a beverage or snack from the café. The aim of the club is to provide a place and time where we can sit, hang out, and have a chat if you like. I am going to bring some playing cards and you are more than welcome to bring something you'd like to do, such a book to read. The first and second Coffee Clubs went extremely well; those who came enjoyed themselves and were able to socialise and relax in a comfortable space. The next Coffee Club will take place on 11 December, and then in the New Year on 8 & 22 January and 12 & 26 February.

The Active Club sessions will take place on the last Friday of the month. The first Active Club activity was swimming. I have begun planning January and February's activities and I will send out emails and do social media posts when I know more. The aim of the Active Club is to get people out and doing something a little more physical than some of the other activities we currently do at Assert. For the Active Club you will need to book in advance, so if you are interested in coming you will need to confirm via email by the Wednesday before the activity.

The Support Sessions are for clients who need some extra assistance to pursue an achievement or overcome an issue. I will help the client to break down the task and create an action plan with them for the following sessions. The clients who receive this service will have seven hours allotted to them which they can organise how they like (maybe one hour per week, or two hours each session, or even dot them over the year, etc.). During the sessions I will aim to provide support, advice and advocacy to help the client achieve their goal.

I have also just begun as a Community Engagement Worker for Community Roots. Community Roots is a new umbrella organisation which aims to build mental health and wellbeing networks in Brighton & Hove by forming cohesive pathways between local services – one of which being Assert! Therefore, I will be the representative for Assert as this organisation builds and develops. If you are interested in the work Community Roots sets out to do, and want to have a look through their directory of the many services and resources who have partnered with them, their website is www.communityroots.org.uk.



Jenna Dadak

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Alternative Thursday Activities

Nicola and I have had an action packed few months being part of the ATA project.

From LazerZone to an indoor sports day, Dice Saloon to Cake in a Mug; we've had a real diversity in the types of activities that we've been running.

I think a personal favourite for many of our clients was the reptile activity. This involved having a whole host of interesting and beautiful animals brought to us here at Community Base through RepTylers (a really cool local family-run business). The animals we got to see and touch were very friendly and immensely cute. I can honestly say that I had never planned on holding a tarantula in my hand before the activity, but the way that Jemima and the team from RepTylers ran the session made everyone feel incredibly at ease and comfortable. It was so great to see everyone having a turn at interacting with certain reptiles, and many a fantastic photo was taken.

In the first photo you can see a chameleon, and they have the absolute cutest hands! I'm sure it's something that many members appreciated; there was something very comforting in the way that this little fella gripped one of your fingers with his 'two-toed' hands and feet. And on a side note, if you have nothing to do after reading this newsletter, I recommend looking up a video of chameleons washing their hands. It will probably make your day. It made mine.



We would absolutely love to have another reptile activity at some point in the future.

Here you can see a lovely tarantula called Charlotte. She was very friendly.

There were many more photos taken that I would love to share with everyone, and hopefully at some point we will upload them all so people can have a look through them all.

On a final note Nicola and I would like to thank our volunteer Lily for all of the help she has given us at ATA. Volunteers absolutely do make the activities that we run at Assert a lot easier, so a big thank you Lily!

David Workman

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Meet our new columnist, Assert member Lydia Wilkins

“Would you like to write a column?”

As somebody relatively new to Assert, I was a little bit taken aback, as well as flattered; I was asked the same month I joined to contribute to this newsletter. As a journalist by trade, it was the intellectual equivalent of catnip – the sort of thing you jump at, ready and eager.

For those of you who don't know me – or if we haven't had a chance to meet yet – my name is Lydia. I am twenty years old, and was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome two months shy of my sixteenth birthday. (And after a three and a half year wait! But that's a topic for another time.) I run a blog to document life with Autism over at mademoisellewomen.com; I also regularly write for newspapers and magazines. Whether it's interviews, opinion pieces (usually about Greta Thunberg and what is wrong with the world), or writing about books, you'll find me constantly scribbling notes or researching whatever topic I need to. Apart from that, you can probably find me in the woods behind my house, walking my dog Charlie. (He's a Sheltie dog – Lassie Come Home, anyone? – but in a house of women, we insist he wears a pink, bejewelled collar.)

The idea of a column was initially broached after a conversation where I had gone off on a completely unrelated tangent. (Occupational hazard!) I had been talking through the Ducks Down A Stream image – a type of metaphor I use to explain to neurotypicals why I cannot understand what they want to tell me. (Too much information means this'll end in a catastrophe – like the ducks being stuck.) One dimensional approaches do not work, especially in classrooms; learning should be about everyone, and not just a conventional majority. Occasionally I got lucky, and would be assigned a teacher who “got it” – but in the interim, I had to have some kind of tool, a visual story of sorts, to make myself understood. But in conversation, this seemed to have created a lightbulb situation – the “ah, I get it” moment.

But writing a column? It isn't something I have done for a while. I used to write for the Mid Sussex Times like this. But it has been too long! What will I write about? And what topics?! Cue research notes and a brainstorming session or three. And a lot of thinking.

So: I'll be regularly writing in this space. And I'll be covering all kinds of topics – Interoception, the perception of sound, helpful strategies. If you would like anything else to be covered, you can always ask me – or email me. In the future, I hope to be able to put interviews into place, such as with Laura James (author of *Odd Girl Out*) and others. I might even occasionally set down “one of my stories”, here; the kind of faux pas you can laugh at retrospectively. The advice to never meet your heroes is very good advice – mine calls himself Harry Potter's Lonely Uncle!

In the meantime, I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas, and a happy new year.

Lydia Wilkins

Freelance journalist / Autism Blogger / NCTJ qualified

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Special Interests

Recently I have been talking with many people who use our services at Assert about special interests. Many autistic people have particular favourite subjects. Special interests can simply be like an enthusiasm or hobby, only more so; some people can dedicate an immense amount of time to their special interest and become very skilled and knowledgeable in their topic/area.

For some people this could be the foundation of a career, a way to meet people, or purely for self-enjoyment and comfort – each of these reasons for a special interest are just as valid as each other. Often, special interests are not even a conscious choice but rather developed from a young age or defined by an existing trait/skill, so there can be an element of chance about the effect they'll have on someone's life.

There is such an array of special interests. Giving people space to explore and enjoy theirs is important to help people manage stress levels, anxiety and energy, and can help people develop skills. There have been many autistic people who have used the skills learnt from their special interests to develop careers in the subjects they are passionate about and share their knowledge with others. For example, there is Chris Packham, who has a special interest in the natural world and now uses his knowledge to present this to others. Greta Thunberg shares her special interest in the environment through activism to promote positive change in the world. Some other autistic people who have become well-known because of their special interests include Guy Martin, Anne Hegerty, Anthony Hopkins and Temple Grandin.

Some people use their special interests to socialise or relax. Many autistic people have talked about using their special interests (such as gaming, sports, music, collecting, art, film and TV) to connect with others. Unstructured social situations can be overwhelming and confusing for some people, so sharing an interest with another is often a good way to get conversation going or have something to do together instead of talking. Others say their special interest gives them a chance to escape into an area where they feel comfortable, relaxed and in their own world.

All special interests are important and should be respected if they bring joy to an individual, in whatever way or reason that might be. They can help bring structure and safety to people in an overwhelming world.

Liam Ragless

Newsletter Contributions

Contact Assert if you have suggestions for the newsletter, or would like us to include something from you such as a poem or article you have written, artwork or photos: assert.bh@assertbh.org.uk

Peer Mentoring at Assert

What is peer mentoring?

Peer support is when people use their own experiences to help each other; having a mentor to work with you on a one-to-one basis who has been through similar experiences to you.

It may be social, emotional or practical support but importantly this support is mutually offered and reciprocal, allowing peers to benefit from the support whether they are giving or receiving it.

Another aspect of peer mentoring is that of a positive role model, involving a longer-term commitment between the mentor and mentee. The peer mentor is linked to a mentee and has the role of befriender, listener and mediator.

What is the value of peer mentoring and support for Assert members?

It is the lived experience aspect of this that the peer mentors at Assert have as a very valuable skill. Of course, every individual is different as every individual's autism is different and unique to them, but our peer mentors' having lived through a variety of difficult situations often linked directly to their autism gives them a much better insight than a non-autistic mentor.

Having a pool of autistic and non-autistic mentors means that whatever issues or needs a prospective mentee comes to me with, there is the possibility of a mentor that can help. Some members come to me asking for more direct and practical support such as letter writing, job hunting or CV writing. Any mentor could be a good match for these tasks; however, those members who have asked for much more targeted support with building confidence around social interaction, for example, can often benefit more from an autistic mentor who has struggled with just such a thing in the past and found successful strategies of their own that have helped them in similar situations.

Our next mentoring training is running on Tuesday 21 January 2020 from 17:30–20:30 at Community Base.

Some of the areas covered in the training are:

“What is mentoring and befriending?”

The mentoring and befriending cycle

Limits and boundaries within a mentoring partnership

Autism and mentoring

Communication and active listening

Please let me know if you are interested in attending.

Cat Hogan-Jones

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Activities

October – Brighton Museum guided tour

Our guided tour started next to one of Salvador Dali's 'Mae West Lips' sofas, made when Dali was being sponsored by his Sussex patron Edward James of Monkton House in West Sussex. We then went on to look at some curious pottery delights including a bust of Princess



Charlotte, daughter of George IV and Caroline of Brunswick, who sadly died in childbirth aged 21. She was a well-loved member of the royal family and, if she had lived, would have become Queen of England after her father. We talked over Dr Richard Russell and Sake Dean Mahomad, both highly influential in shaping the Brighton we know today. Passing the 'What the Butler Saw' viewer, a once-common sight on the pier that only fell out of favour with the advent of decimalisation, we moved through to the upstairs gallery past costumes, LGBTQ, and on to some more modern expressionist paintings including one that looked (to my eyes at least) a lot like a piece of cardboard painted a little around the edges – though the guide did stress it had been donated rather than bought by the museum!

We finished our tour in the new Elaine Evans Archaeology gallery focussing on the local finds and facial reconstructions from skeletons found at Whitehawk Camp, Ditchling Road and Patcham among others. The faces added a relatable element to the finds unearthed with them and their remains were able to add much more to the story of the early human settlers in and around Brighton. After the guided tour we looked around the Egyptian gallery and education rooms, where I lost a game of table football and Michael tried on a fantastic tribal mask (see picture). The museum has so much to look at and is always well worth a visit – we only scratched the surface!



If you have any ideas for activities that you would like to do, please let me know either by email, phone or text, or come and talk to me at a drop-in.

Cat Hogan-Jones

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