



Tim

Tim hadn't heard of PDA until his youngest son was diagnosed with this profile of autism two years ago. During his son's assessment Tim realised there were parallels with his own life. He was referred to adult mental health services by his GP where he was told that despite displaying clear autism traits, he would need to be assessed privately in order to receive a diagnosis that included PDA. After undergoing assessment at Help for Psychology in early 2019, Tim was diagnosed with autism with a PDA profile at the age of 59. Tim has a successful career within the stainless steels industry and is currently the Secretary-General of the International Stainless Steel Forum. He is sharing his story in the hope it will help young adults with PDA who are navigating their way through the education system or beginning their careers.

Being diagnosed with PDA came as a relief to me as it helped me to make sense of some of the difficulties I'd faced growing up. I'd always been aware that I struggled more than my siblings and peers in certain situations and learning about PDA has helped me to understand why that was.

I grew up in Sheffield with my parents, sister and step-brother. In early childhood our house was quite small and I remember often feeling physically and mentally trapped. When I was a little over 2 years old I would escape from the rear garden (if the gate was accidentally left open) and make my way to our local railway line where I sat and watched the trains go by. I insisted an adult helped me to use the pedestrian crossing as I had learned a few things about road safety! From the age of 8 I discovered a way to relieve this feeling of entrapment even more and much to my Mother's horror I began to escape through the bathroom window. Every evening at around half past eight I would jump out then scale the garden wall and run across the road to our local park. It didn't occur to me that this was a dangerous thing to do; it just felt good to have a release from some of the pressure I was feeling.

From the age of 10 we moved to a larger house and the additional space lessened my feelings of confinement. I wasn't under so much pressure to keep everywhere tidy and could retreat to my own room if I was feeling upset or overwhelmed. There was still an

expectation that I would help around the house but I found I could comply with this if I added my own conditions to the task; if I was helping with the dishes I would decide who washed and dried.

Being a member of a church-going family meant there were often social functions to attend. As I got older I'd vehemently oppose attending these gatherings as they made me feel uncomfortable due to their unpredictable nature. My extreme refusal would often take the form of a physical meltdown and eventually my shouting, rolling around and banging of fists would result in me being allowed to stay at home alone. I'd try to avoid many situations where there was a degree of uncertainty or interaction with overly domineering people such as dentists and opticians. Nowadays these professionals make adjustments to accommodate the needs of children but I grew up in the 1960s when this wasn't the norm.

During my teenage years I became better at articulating feelings and luckily my parents were willing to listen. Initially they were shocked by my opinions but they did respect my wishes and accepted that I didn't like some of their friends and didn't want to socialise with them. As an adult there are still many societal expectations I don't want to comply with and I wish my choices were respected as 'different' rather than just 'weird'.

Looking back, despite knowing nothing about autism, my parents instinctively adopted some PDA-friendly strategies with me. My Mum was a paediatric theatre-sister so knew many techniques to distract and calm distressed children. By nature she was a quiet, softly spoken person who infrequently shouted or showed signs of anger. My Dad wasn't a shouter either but I could recognise when I'd crossed the line with him. His face would tense and he would grit his teeth while speaking to me. He always made a point of talking to me after any disagreement to discuss why he thought my behaviour was inappropriate and how we could approach things differently.

Family life could have been easier for us all had I been given more choices and freedom to make my own decisions. My parents tried their best and my sister still thinks I got away with more as a child than she ever did! If I could go back and offer them any advice it would be to help them understand that many people approach things in life differently, not wrongly, just differently.

Academically my success was patchy and my teachers described me as a 'mystery'. I couldn't muster up any enthusiasm for arts subjects and found every lesson an ordeal. There was a period when I would run away from school in order to avoid humanities classes. I especially had an issue with religious education as I believed going to church was ample religion for me and I didn't see the point of listening to it all again. I was extremely uncooperative during those classes!

Although I excelled in maths and science classes I struggled with exams as I couldn't organise myself mentally in time. My parents arranged extra help for me in order to hone this skill. They always encouraged me to focus on my stronger subjects so maths

and science became my chosen pathway. Eventually it led to me studying applied science at university.

My chosen speciality was metallurgy and it was on this course I found a circle of life-long friends with similar interests and characteristics to my own. We were instantly accepting of each other's unusual traits which may have been partly due to the niche subject we had chosen. My degree course was something of a slog as the level of homework was intense. Not only was it academically difficult but there was a large volume of work to complete. I would avoid starting tasks then feel even more stressed when I had to catch up.

My friends and I often pooled our expertise to help each other grasp complex concepts we were struggling to understand. These study sessions helped lay the foundations for my ongoing adult friendships. I sometimes discussed problems with my Dad too as he worked in a related field so could understand what help I needed.

After graduating with a 2:2 I joined British Steel as a graduate trainee in 1980. I've worked within the Stainless Steels industry for the entirety of my career and am now the Secretary-General of the International Stainless Steel Forum. I achieved a Post-graduate Diploma and latterly a Masters Degree when I was in my 40's; both of which I flew through as I felt I was intellectually in the right place to cope with the work.

My choice of career is quite specialist and I've always been surrounded by people with a scientific background. These are both factors I know have contributed to my success. Working within a niche environment means there aren't the usual financial pressures and deadlines. I'm given space to think and process information at my own pace. My experience of working with scientists is that they're very accepting of each other's unusual traits and actually quite intrigued when I discuss PDA with them. It is important to note that for most of my career I've worked for a Scandinavian company that practises a person-centred ethos with its employees. This has allowed me to have a successful career whilst also managing my need for space and freedom.

Since my PDA diagnosis I'm more aware of the many prejudices that exist for autistic people within society. During some recent court proceedings I attended, I was told by a barrister that, as someone with two degrees, I shouldn't need extra processing time. Luckily the judge shared my feelings of incredulity and the barrister was forced to retract this statement. I fully appreciate how much work is needed to educate society about autism.

Along with adjustments at work, I've found I can now better manage other aspects of my daily life. I carry out all domestic tasks to a high standard although have been criticised in the past for taking too long to complete them. My view is that I'll complete important tasks and leave other things for another day. This approach works for me and I now have the confidence to believe in myself and my methods. I also now know that my mental wellbeing benefits from having down time after completing these tasks so I make sure there's time to relax afterwards.

Over the years, through trial and error, I've developed many coping strategies to help deal with life's challenges. Some of [my 'top-tips'](#) could be adapted to suit the unique requirements of others with PDA. There are two pieces of advice that I feel are most important though:

- seize every opportunity presented to you; just try things to see if you like them
- prioritise time doing nothing; allow yourself headspace every day to re-charge

I count myself as one of the lucky ones as I have a career that suits my personality and lifestyle. My hope for the future is that I can offer advice and support to young adults with PDA, including my youngest son, who are contemplating their educational and career options. I'm in a privileged position now and would like to use my unique insights into PDA to help others.