

Jo

Personal Reflection: Surviving A-Levels

Jo is a PDA young adult. He studied A-Level Philosophy, Maths and English at a mainstream school and shares his personal experience here, offering valuable insights for both young people and adults. Jo reflects on some of the challenges he faced and the approaches he found helpful to overcome these challenges. He also talks about the benefits of self-awareness and how meditating helped him with this.

When I was 16, I started at a new school to study for my A-Levels. It was the first time I had attended a regular mainstream school since I quit early in Year 7. My schooling for the 6 years in between had been the complete opposite to a mainstream environment, so there was no reason to believe I would do any better this time than I had previously, except for the fact that I had accepted it would happen and that it was my will. And that tends to be the struggle with PDA I think - starting.

It's probably unhelpful to hear then that in this case it wasn't a struggle and indeed it doesn't strike me as an example of my own struggles with PDA, but it is illuminating. With the mental block on actually entering the school premises and walking into lessons out of the way, you could say the rest of my experience was pretty typical.

I was introverted and years behind my peers in so many ways, I felt. Nobody would say I experienced school to the fullest, spending most of my time avoiding people by reading and leaving school as much as I could. But I did make friends, or was made friends with by more outgoing, industrious kinds of people, and the experience socially was invaluable.

One true obstacle beyond the doorway for a PDA mind might be completing work, particularly at home. It was a challenge for me and one I feel I failed in, since I did not achieve academically what I could have. In my experience, the best method to surmount the resistance to working independently is introspection, which consequently enabled me to avoid slipping into unconscious activities as a frequent habit.

For example, one unconscious habit I have is spending all my spare time sitting in front of a computer. I should emphasise I do not want to support any notions that people should forcibly enact these changes onto PDA people. The choice to stay conscious should be a personal one. Once conscious and unanchored, work becomes something I am motivated to do in my experience.

If - and this is more likely - you can't unshackle yourself from unconsciousness, and this is a state I still find myself in frequently, then there are external workarounds that I believe can be effective for a PDA person, depending on the situation of course.

One workaround for me was having sessions with a teacher where she would do her work at the front of the classroom, and I would busy myself until time was up. And it does just happen, when a figure is there to keep you conscious, that you busy yourself, often with things you have needed to do for a long time.

In my last year of A-Levels where I had all these techniques implemented, my average baseline of work, even at my most unconscious, was significantly improved.

I do not think that depending entirely on yourself remaining conscious through sheer force of will is a tenable solution in the long run. Finding compassion for yourself and being kind especially when making 'mistakes' is what leads to wellbeing. Feeling weaker than others and less resilient has been a normal background belief forever since PDA started conflicting with me, but finding the awareness and perspective to see it and disentangle yourself from it is crucial to stopping suffering. And this goes for all problems I believe.

In that sense the most important advancement I made during the three years I spent studying for A-Levels was not to do with school at all. It was experiencing a period of depression and learning as a result about mental wellness and spirituality and that this most important and ancient pursuit has been explored by people for thousands of years before now, (Buddhism, Taoism, etc). And this is a truth being rediscovered more and more by the more modern culture that unfortunately regressed in the mental and spiritual aspect of life.

I truly believe the answer to anyone's problems, but especially for PDAers, is found through meditation or, if that makes you uncomfortable, simply awareness. Awareness does not come only through meditation. And there are different kinds of exercises for encouraging awareness, such as various kinds of meditation, but also other activities like swimming or running - when done meditatively.

Meditation, done right, exercises awareness and awareness is crucial in improving literally everything. For PDAers specifically, meditation can open up the physical and emotional process that occurs when they avoid a demand and awareness shows how they perceive the demands within their minds.

I think what it means to be PDA is to be fundamentally at odds in certain respects with a system that is primarily experienced as a child or young adult. I'm sure this is not unique to PDA, and I am not the first person to observe that the education system is no work of genius, but how we can turn the seemingly negative experience of fitting in poorly with the expectation of schools and of the world, is to accelerate the process underpinning all people's lives and 'wake up'.

It is no good to think that the primary goal of PDAers is to be integrating into the wider world. **The true goal is to emphasise the uniquely beneficial attributes of PDA and what it offers us.** This all begins with meditation, awareness, I think.