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Joel Carver >> First of all, I'd like to say thank you to the wonderful people here at VCU Autism Center for Excellence for having me. It's a huge opportunity. I really appreciate it and without further ado, let's get started.

So I apologize for this slide. You can see me. I didn't realize that when I was remaining the presentation. I have facial hair now, but that's not crucially important.

And as every professor or guest lecturer at a university will do, I'll discuss who I am, why I'm here, why you should be listening to me. I'm a junior at the college of William and Mary. I'm currently majoring in biology. Class of 2017. We'll talk more about the creative group at university of Mary. I can't say that I founded it but I can say that I made it what it is today but got to keep a little bit of secrecy.

I'm an eagle scout. I am an autistic self advocate. Before anybody goes wait a minute, what, I am autistic. And now we know. And I'm a public speaker. A little bit of a public speaker hoping to build that up as we go along.

And let's see here.

Okay. I was born at Fairfax Hospital. Now, I put this on here because it's a little bit more of a story than it sounds like. You were born, okay, whatever. I was actually born ten weeks early after some serious medical complications. So I was seven when I was diagnosed with Asperger's and I didn't know this until later but my parents, and this is an important piece of how I ended up where I am today. My parents, they really dedicated themselves to learning because their goal was to improve my quality of life. Every parent of an autistic child wants the best for their child. It was specifically with the goal not of improving my ability to do one thing or make me normal but to make the life that I was going to live as good as it possibly could be.

I lived in -- well, okay. So after being born in Fairfax, I was moved around a while. Lived in Washington, D.C. Lived in Leesburg immediately after I was born. Eventually settled in Washington for a while. It's pretty much a suburb of D.C. but kind of growing on its own right now. Eventually I moved out to Remington, Virginia. If you've ever heard of this, I'm sorry. Between second and third grade. A little bit out of order here because I was tested for the GT program in kindergarten. It was a rough process and I feel this is applicable to the parents of autistic children who are hopefully listen to this and to psychological professionals because when I was tested originally I was slated for the bottom third of ability and after being tested again separately outside of my school they decided that was not the case and I was eligible for the G testimony program. After moving to Remington I was kind of tested again because there was a struggle of not an ability to keep up with the material but a lack of interest in the material and I think a lot of autistic people have a struggle with people perceiving they can't when really it's that they don't in terms of doing schoolwork. I struggled immensely with staying on task, not for a lack of ability but for a lack of interest. So it was decided that I would take a fourth grade science class during third grade to be partially accelerated. That went very well. My grades notably improved. So after an arduous process, which involved numerous paperwork, numerous types of paperwork, a test, the whole school, you know, having to sign a piece of paper in blood it seemed like at the time, I was whole grade accelerated. I was the first person in the school to be whole grade accelerated from third grade straight to fifth. And I mention this because it was a significant decision to do so because my already existing social deficits were complicated by the fact that I was emotionally mentally a year behind in terms of development.

My ability may have been at a fifth grade level, but my social skills were not. And it was an interesting year. I transitioned from a -- the smart kid. It was fun. For a couple glorious weeks children would approach me and talk about, oh, you're the smart kid. Say something smart. It was children being

children and that did not last long. So don't think that I had a relaxing elementary or middle school experience because people very quickly realized it was more fun to make fun of me than to praise me. I don't know why they did that but they did. And because of my autism, I didn't have the social skills to circumvent that. I rapidly became a target for bullying and this is something that I've heard a lot of autistic people and a lot of parents of autistic people talk about. I wish that I had in my experience a way, an easy solution, something that I can say to fix that problem entirely, but I don't. What I can say is it's crucially important if an autistic child is being bullied to address with this child by the parents by the people at school that it is not a lack of their rights as a person that leads to this, it's not a lack of value, significance; it's the other child feeling a need to push themselves up. This can I will warn lead to other social difficulties. Autistic people tend to verbalize what they believe to be the truth. They may tell their pierce that you're just looking for a rise out of me. That is not a useful tactic for handling bullying, but I believe with all of my heart it is the best thing to tell an autistic child that they have value and to reinforce the notion it is not them but the people bullying them that is leading them to their treatment. On the subject of bullying, I transferred to tailor middle school. I don't like the use of graduation when referring to elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. Transitioned, that's the word I decided to use. I transitioned to tailor middle school, which was not the exciting introduction to the adult world that I thought it would be as a fifth grader. It was more of the same. It was -- the bullying really started in middle school in full intensity. A couple of kids singled me out as an easy target and I was very quickly put on the bottom of the social pile. I say pile because it is a pile. All of the children are unsure of exactly where they are. They are in a mass of social complexity that no one really understands and they're all pushing anyone down they can to be on top. This is an incredibly difficult time for autistic people because neurotypicals have no idea what they're doing. With

autistics there's no defined social strata. It's all hormones and transitions and adjustment from childhood and adolescence. It could be entirely where I grew up, but there was a large focus on growing up in middle school and even in fifth grade there was a lot of pressure to drop all of the childhood interests in favor of more adult interests. This is a struggle for a lot of autistic people because it's a time when people haven't really come to terms with you do you and my story was Pokeman. I loved Pokeman. I still do. Transitioning to middle school not a lot of people did. And certainly not with the incomplete intensity I did. It was okay if I liked it but it was not okay for them that I liked it. I hope anyone ten dough doesn't get upset since it's trademarked but we're going to find out.

Because of the intensity with which I liked Pokeman, it was easy to target that and get me upset. I became an easy target for bullying in fifth grade and that shipped right off into middle school.

Also in middle school I believe it was seventh grade, but I have no memory of this conversation. I was informed for the first time that I was diagnosed with something on the spectrum. At the time I was diagnosed in -- well, when I was seven I was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. They have since done away with that and it is now technically Asperger's spectrum disorder. I identify as autistic person rather than a person with Asperger's disorder. Understand through this talk I may use them interchangeably. That's my preference. The technically correct thing is autism spectrum disorder. I know that's an issue of contention among autistic advocates, psychological professional and parents.

Also in middle school I joined the Boy Scouts of America. This is something that I highly recommend for any -- situationally recommend for any parents of autistic people. Cub Scouts was something that I was in much earlier and was not a pleasant experience but I can say that Boy Scouts with parental support was a fantastic place for me growing up. It was an opportunity not just to experience the world, gain valuable skills, learn how to interact with my pierce. I did a lot of social learning in Boy Scouts, and it

was a place that was free from a lot of the more complex social behaviors. It's a very simple place. The big kids want to be big kids, the little kids want to be big kids too and therefore the little kids end up getting pushed away from the big kids by the big kids and it's just very archetypal when you have the different age groups but at the same time it was easier to comprehend. It was by no means a perfect organization, nor a perfect group but it was a wonderful experience because I got to feel confidence in myself, I got to be proud of who I am and what I could do rather than be ashamed of it like I was going to middle school. Eventually I transitioned to liberty high school.

Now, I talk a little bit about middle school and I have one more point to make before I jump fully into high school, and that is that it is crucially important during middle school for the parents of an autistic child to support not only the parent child relationship but also the child's relationship with their friends. As anyone can tell you except maybe a couple extreme extroverts, it is difficult to make new friends. It is even more difficult to make new friends in middle school. I was actually sent to a more distant middle school because it was a lot of my friends were going from elementary school. And this was tremendously significant because it meant that I could hold onto that group of friends rather than struggling to find anyone at all to connect with. And outside of school I was given a lot of opportunities to connect with my pierce to hang out with friends and further those relationships. Obviously friendships are a huge part of social interactions with other people. And learning with a couple people meant that I had much better odds of success when I was engaging at school in general. So I highly recommend fostering not just parent child relationships but also child relationships with their pierce. Situationally. Observe your child's friends. Make sure they are a good fit for your children because it is important they have friends and it is important those friends are good friends to them.

Now, high school, one of the -- up until this point it was the biggest transition period of my life, it was the biggest time of personal growth. And a lot

of things on high school put me on the path that I am today, as an autistic self advocate, as a bio major and as a William and Mary student.

The first point that I'll talk about is joining the swim team. I was sports avoidant for most of my life. I dabbled in soccer in second grade, but it's not a good fit for a lot of autistic people. You ever seen like child sports, early children sports? It's not a fun place. The kids all want to win. They all want to be the best. It is cut throat and the parents want to win more than they care about their kids doing okay. They want their kid to be the best and it's a lot of social pressure from the kids to each other, from the parents to the kids, and in addition to having asthma it was especially a place that I did not want to be. I did not enjoy team sports. But it was decided that I would join the swim team because something that's fairly common is clumsiness on land, lack of coordination on land leaks to grace in water among autistic people. I was a December sent natural swimmer and joined the swim team because I wanted to be in shape. I wanted to broaden my horizons and of course because my parents wanted me to do a sport so I could get into college. And it really was a novel experience because a lot of the friends that I'd had in middle school had gone their separate ways. They all wanted to be their own people, socially significant, and had left me in the dust as soon as they possibly could. But with the swim team, it was friendship based in mutual suffering, because we all trained hard. Never did well, but it was a good experience. And it was unique because it was an individual sport. My performance, while it did affect the team in a general sense, I was not competing with my team. I was competing with myself for a better time. And there was -- the swim team was great because they didn't place pressure on me. There was no if you don't do better we won't be your friend or we'll beat you up in the locker room. It was do as well as you can. We're here to support you and if you can find an environment like that for an autistic child it will do wonders for their sense of belonging and self-esteem.

I decided to take a psychology class my senior year of class, partially because it's interesting and

partially because it had a record for the easiest class and I wanted to get an A. I was taking this class and was assigned a book report on a developmental disorder. It was not Asperger's syndrome. So naturally when I was assigned it I said, hey, I don't want to do this. Teacher, can I present something on Asperger's syndrome in they said, yeah, sure, whatever, that's totally fine. So I read Tony at wood's book on Asperger's' syndrome, the complete guide. And it was a profound and life changing experience but more on that later.

I chose to speak to my psychology about autism and the fact that I was autistic. It was really the defining experience that set me on the path that I am on now. I've had many of these. Without one I wouldn't be where I am now. I've had many, but speaking and being accepted was huge. I was able to talk about who I was and instead of people saying, oh, he's that weird kid; it was, oh, he makes sense now. We'll accept you. So to everyone in that class, thank you. It made a big difference in my life. Ironically enough, that was on Friday the 13th of 2012 in December. December 15th of 2012, I was accepted into William and Mary. And so two huge life changing events happened within a span of two days and the only thing that happened in between was shooting a bunch of people with plastic beebees. It was a very significant weekend, and William and Mary, I believe, is truly a great school for autistic people. But enough of that pitch.

I reached eagle scout while I was in high school, and I am very glad that I did that. I don't have too much to say on that. It's not a complicated thing. I will give a piece of advice to any parents who have autistic children or psychologists who have nonautistic children, anyone who has children who are in Boy Scouts, don't think that the eagle scout is limited to making benches.

Some of you out there won't think too highly of this because it was made using a video game, but I actually recorded a public service announcement and played it to my high school about drunk driving, and it was -- I believe that it had more of an impact than a bench in park. So don't limit yourself if you can do more than just beverages. Because there's a lot out

there and you'll never know how far you'll go until you try.

William and Mary, orientation was something all right. I know a lot -- I had a lot more belief in my social abilities. I really reinvented myself which I think is a huge benefit of the freshman year experience in college. Eventually right before the deadline I declared my major to be a -- they didn't have an advocacy major at William and Mary yet and created the neuro diversity student group. I said I'd mention this later during the first couple slides and I will mention more later but I will say the neuro diversity student group is a group for students and by students supported by the faculty for neuro diverse people. Originally it was one member who had been recruited by campus faculty because she was on the autism spectrum with the goal of improving the campus for autistic people. Shy did a great job. Danielle Thomas. Shout out. And it was because of her and a presentation on autism that I gave to my freshman hall during orientation that I joined the university student group and said, man, this is great. We should get more people in this, which led to what it is today. And here I am a junior at William and Mary, an autistic self advocate, a public speaker and looking forward. I'd like to do more public speaking and spread the good word so to speak, but let's talk about some stuff that isn't my life. Just kidding. It's more of my life.

I remember several of the conversations I had about coming to terms with my diagnosis. When I was first told that I had -- well, what if I have this, I do this thing, I do this thing, I don't know but I'd never taken the time to look up the symptoms and look at myself objectively to see if I had them. I had just heard syndrome and shut down and eventually I got around this because I said, you know, if I have this thing, I've had it my entire life. I am still the same person whether I say I don't have it, whether I say that I do have it. If I wake up tomorrow and say I am an autistic person, the only thing that's changed is that I have said that. I am the same person regardless. For any parents trying to help their kids understand their diagnosis and come to terms with who they are, I think it's a very powerful tool. It's not



like being diagnosed with the flu. It's not something you got last week and will be gone in a couple weeks. Nor is it something that you've acquired through the course of your life and that's crucially important for parents to understand. This is a genetic lifelong condition. And I'm not saying this because there's no hope. That's not at all true.

I'm saying this because for autistic people to be successful and happy, they and the people supporting them need to understand that they will be autistic their entire lives. That's not a bad thing. Just means they're different.

So a big part with coming to terms with my diagnosis was despite the fact that I've got the William and Mary logo here, because it's not quite applicable yet was this psychology class. I had a great experience in high school with this one class and this presentation was huge, but what I think was even more huge was reading Tony at wood's book and seeing list of symptoms and having it all laid out and looking in the pages of a book describing a medical condition seeing a mirror. Seeing almost every single facet of my personality affected in some way by the list of symptoms that I saw, that all of the things that I'd been trying to understand my entire life, why I was so fixated on X, Y, or Z, why I loved Pokeman or whatever so much was not that I was a freak, which was what I believed until then, I was not a monster or a misfit or a reject. I was an autistic person. It was a part of what I was. I was not alone. And that realization profoundly changed my outlook on life. It's why I decided I needed to talk about it and why I'm still on that path today, because I don't know if I broke down in tears while I was reading this I know that I have since because of its implications and I know that it was and is the most significant and life changing event that I've ever gone through, because it redefined myself image and was tremendous in making me the person I am today.

Now, this is president Heavily. He's the president of Mary. The next step was during orientation. I really struggled with making myself as socially open as possible, because I wanted more friends. I wanted more people to have a positive

perception of me. And it was really that goal that pushed me into the realm of someone who was not just socially competent but socially successful. And I think it's that goal that separates a lot of autistic people who have -- I will in no way define success by the number of friends that you have. However, it is hard to be happy as a child or as a teenager when you feel that you only have three or four friends. It was the goal I want these people to like me, not be my friends, be my bestfriend because I wanted that my entire life. It was that transition to I want to be the kind of person that people appreciate and that led me to a new outlook to develop social skills through attempted mimicry. We'll talk more about that later. I decided to give a talk about autism to my freshman hall. After my high school experience with giving this presentation, after being accepted for who I was rather than seen as a strange outlier in high school, I really knew that if I was going to be successful, happy in college, I needed the people around me to understand how autism affected me. That I wasn't like everyone else. And why? Because that understanding meant that people could be more patient. They could be more understanding. For the same reason that you wouldn't expect someone with a broken leg to walk up a flight of stairs, I might not be able to do something that one or the other people in my hall could. Having that understanding, that connection I thought and did make my life substantially better. And during this presentation I affected two people. Haley, the current leader of the neuro diversity group, and my RA Kendra Jackson who said I know someone who would really appreciate this and went to Danielle who was the first member of the neuro diversity student group and said I have an autistic student in my hall. You guys should get to know each other.

That led to the neuro diversity student group. In I tell current incarceration. This is a picture I'm very proud of. On the left, you have Steve, author of the tremendously influential and significant book neuro tribes. A world changing history of autism. On the right we have John Alder Robinson, New York times best selling author, my mentor. In the middle you have me grinning from ear to ear like a fool to be around such

awesome people. And I have the exercise ball up there because I remember a very funny story from my freshman hall that has absolutely no significance. But one of the people on my hall, we were playing soccer with a yoga ball and he ended up kicking it. It bounced across the hall into a door, across the hall into the wall, across the hall into the exit sign that was hanging from the ceiling and it just went. I have a lot of fun memories in my freshman year. It was a hard time but I want any autistic people to know it is a huge challenge but can lead to huge success. It can lead to a different life.

Now, this is the neuro diversity student group. What a motley crew we are. This is an outdated picture. Some of the members have graduated, some have gone on their merry ways, but in the middle with no sleeves in December is me and two people to my left. The shortest one is Haley. The current leader of the neuro diversity student group and a fantastic advocate.

For those of you who've heard me use this word and have never heard it before, neurodiversity is a rising self advocacy movement started by but by no means limited to autistic people. There was a movement a little while back among the autistic population to appreciate the strengths and differences of autistic people rather than just the detriments of being autistic, but the core tenets are that all people have value. That personhood is a granted right to all humans and that should not be taken away for any reason, whether disability, difference, or anything else that's covered in any other diversity or civil rights thing.

And secondly that brain differences have value to society. In a very pragmatic way, neuro diversity is useful because for example, this is an example used a lot among neuro diverse advocates, modern classrooms are where they are because of autistic people. And will it be improved because of a combination for autistic people. The example frequently used is lighting. Some lighting is very harsh and does not lead to effective learning. It leads to headaches and lack of attention. Now, this has been demonstrated, but if you ask young children which lighting do you prefer, they may not be able to tell you. They may not

notice a difference. But autistic people will. An autistic student may notice there's a smell in the room that ends up making all the kids drool and ready for lunch before anyone else does. They may not even process it but an autistic person will. It's that universal search for accessibility, accommodation that leads to positive social change.

Another great example is elevators. Elevators were made for people in wheelchairs with polio because of the Americans with Disabilities Act almost every building in America that has multiple floors is required to have an elevator.

Now, I'm going to ask a question. How many people out there have never ridden an elevator in their life? I'm waiting. I'll wait. That's right. You guys can't hear me. Just kidding.

But because elevators were created for people with disabilities, now people who want to move heavy things up several floors don't have to use construction equipment. They don't have to hire a bunch of people and try to cram someone into a staircase. Elevators are a huge boon to many groups of people, from as I've just said, people trying to move heavy equipment or desks up office buildings, people who have 67 floors to go up before they can get to their floor. People trying to pitch to the boss but only can trap them in an elevator for 15 seconds a day. Elevators have had a huge positive success on corporate America and all of America, but wouldn't exist if it were not for the Americans -- well, not exist, but not be as prevalent as they are without the Americans for disabilities act. And this is just one example. There are others, but I won't bore you with droning on about that. I'll stick to the exciting story of my life and how awesome I am:

Move on. So the objectives of the neuro diversity group at William and Mary are advocacy, support and education. I bet you'd never guess. Advocacy is focused on making changes for any given person who is struggling to make changes on their own. With ten or 20 or 30 voices, all saying, hey, we're struggling, we need help. It is received a lot better and more quickly than a single person that's saying I need help with this. They can easily be ignored or just told no but when you have a bunch of us reading a stink about

it you can't ignore it. While we haven't had troubles like that in my memory at William and Mary, I think it's important for things like this to exist because it means that if for no other reason than so that voices can be heard, and not just heard but welcomed. That promotes thought on subject.

Now, second goal is support. It's really important for an autistic person to feel welcome in a large group of people in a college when you don't have a small group that you know well. It's the same effect that toddlers have when they're growing up. This is for all people going to college but more so for autistics. When in a new environment a toddler will find attachment, security with their mother and then explore. Once they feel safe and comfortable and protected they'll go off and be adventurous. It's because of that base they're able to do so. When people go to college it's because of their roommates or their freshman hall or their frat that they're able to branch out and try new things. And the neurodiversity group aims to provide a similar support group for neuro diverse people or anyone who's looking for it and just happens to stumble to us before they find any other group. Because it's a challenge. And especially if you have a perspective that isn't shared, if you are 2 percent of the population and are struggling to deal with the fact that you can hear in one of your lecture halls going the entire class over the professor and aren't able to sort out the noise or that you can't eat at most of the dining halls because the food is mixed and tastes really intense and unpalatable or because you're just really struggling socially and don't have anyone to turn to, that's what we're there for. And finally education. This is one of my favorite things for in terms of neurodiversity student actions because to me the most important change in my life regarding Asperger's and autism is understanding.

When I understood that I had Asperger's I came to terms with who I was as a person in a way I hadn't before. I could understand myself. I could start at that point and work outward to find out who I was. It was because my friends knew that they were more tolerant. That if I said something unintentionally hurtful they could come to me and say, hey, I know you

have Asperger's, have you -- what did you mean by this and I can promptly apologize rather than losing a friend over it.

Spreading information, especially with the lack of information present in a good chunk of the American public makes education hugely important for autistic people and for any neuro diverse condition.

At past we've -- well, past tense, not terribly complicated. We've had a discussion panel with health outreach peer education, a program at William and Mary designed around mental and physical health where we talked to educator in that group about neuro diversity about what anxiety, depression, ADD, and autism can mean for college students and how these bright young people could help others deal with it with their peers. We've been reaching out with corpus, which is an up-and-coming disability -- I'm not sure if it's a support group on Mary campus but they are a great group and I look forward to working with them in the future. Most recently we've had the disability day of mourning supported by the autistic self advocacy network and run by Haley, the current leader of the neuro diversity student group. It was a heartbreaking but very well done event and I haven't told her this and need to send out a message, but Haley did a fantastic job with this. It was very well orchestrated and everyone involved has my utmost respect for participating.

Neuro diversity at large. Neuro diversity is growing very rapidly. It's supported by large groups such as SAP, an international software firm, William and Mary and hopefully soon VCU. Thanks for having me.

And I'm really hopeful for where it's going because it is, I believe, the next step in the universal civil rights movement, which of course the civil rights movements of the 1960s are by no means over and I'm just leaving that can of worms unopened. But I think it's the next direction for America and the world to take, because it's had a sordid history with institutionalization and all sorts of nasty things and we're at a really good place right now and more importantly making really good progress. So I have hope for neuro diversity.

Now I've got a little bit of time left or maybe a lot of time. I have no sense of time. I'd like to

discuss a couple of symptoms of autism and Asperger's because as I said earlier understanding is huge.

Now, parents, psychological, professionals, teachers, you've probably heard these symptoms described, hyper fixation or hyper focusing. A couple other names for it. But these are symptoms that I feel I can provide a little insight to that maybe your kid just hasn't gotten to a point where they realize they're different. Maybe your child is nonverbal and you're struggling to find a way to communicate with them. Or maybe you've just never heard this side of the story because you've never been around an adult autistic person. Look at me. I'm an adult. And in addition hyper fixation, sensory stuff because that's complicated and hard to describe unless you are dedicated to learning about it and social skills. The most frequently referenced symptom of autism.

Now, Nintendo, please don't sue me. This is Pikmin. This is a game cube and now Wii you game. One of my favorite games of all time. I was lovely in mad with it in middle school and had so much fun with it. But it's more than that. Because I probably spent more energy thinking about this than I did about my middle school education. Now, to clarify, it's not that I spent more time playing Pokemon. I had limited time when I was a kid to play and I did not like that. But when I was not playing, I was thinking about it. I was creating ideas. I was thinking about new and exciting creatures that I could suggest to Nintendo to include in the game. I'm proud of this, I've looked at Pokemon three and some of the things they matched is what I came up with in middle school. I know it's because of the numbers and they had to include one of my 15,000 ideas, but I'm still happy that one of them showed up. So that's another thing. But hyper fixation is more than just being really into something. It is feeding off of an interest in a way that I only see a neuro typical do when they are in puppy love. When you are completely fixated, completely absorbed in something and you want to spend all of your time on that one topic, on that one person, with that person, that is the kind of intensity that hyperfixation involves.

You feed off of it. You get energy from thinking about it. You're excited by it. And anything else

that you do requires constant energy to just pry yourself away from it. It not something that you can just drop. You can't say I'll just stop being interested in this because it's not so much that you're interested in it as that you need to learn about it, you need to think about it, and it is a beautiful and wonderful experience and good Lord is it hard to deal with when you're trying to do something that isn't think about Pokemon, like do well in middle school. Something I'd like to mention on this is how crucially important it is for parents not just to tolerate but to support their children's fixations. Now, of course, you can suggest new things and you always should because autistic people, myself included, have a tendency to do what's comfortable rather than try new things. Always be gently opening ways for them to expand themselves than their interests. Be careful with when you push it, because I definitely grew as a child when I was pushed, but there are also some situations where I would say it would have been better if I hadn't been. And it's all guesswork. So do the best you can as a parent because you won't know until you try.

However, please, please, please, please, from an autistic person to you, support your child's fixations. Because they will not let go of them because they're not supported. They will only let go of them when they are done with it. And that happens. Sometimes it will be a couple weeks, sometimes it will be a couple months, and sometimes it will be a couple decades. You don't know when it's going to last. You don't know, maybe their interest in trains, as stereotypical as that is, will lead them to be a train engineer, will lead them to be an electrical engineer when they start working on computers. It's hard to know when that will matter and when you'll be backing a horse that will get all the way to the finish line of their life and when it's something that they'll just be interested in for a couple of days or weeks. But it is exhausting as an autistic person to try and regulate your interests for the sake of being friends with people, trying to rein in this intensity, because other people just don't want to hear about it because they're lame and they don't like Pokemon. But to have a parent support a special



interest is huge, because it means not just oh, my parent supports me having fun with this, but they have someone to share it with and they will go on. I mean, I have seen myself do this and good God, it will be hours before they run out of stuff to talk about. Then they'll get right back into it and come out 15 minutes later with another small lecture series that could be hosted at Harvard. The intensity is beautiful to experience and exhausting when it's not your fixation and I get that, but, please, support your child's fixations because the emotional feed of being able to share that with someone is huge, and that's why a lot of students, a lot of autistic students have good relationships with their teachers, because they can go talk about history or trains or science with one of their teachers or professors. It will make a huge difference. Don't just say, okay, that's good, son. Get involved. Learn about it. You might just find it interesting.

The next symptom is not nearly as fun to talk about. Overstimulation is something that a lot of autistic people have to deal with on a regular basis and can be absolutely crushing. Now, I have a couple of ways of trying to explain what it's like to be overstimulated, to be autistic in an environment that's not autistic friendly. I think the best way that you can explain it is I want you to imagine being in a room full of people, all of who are talking to each other, and to you directly. You also have two earbuds in and it's not that you're listening to one thing; it's that you're listening to two different things. You're listening to God save the queen played by five finger death punch at max volume and you can't hear your own thoughts over it and in the other ear you have an extremely complex technical instruction, maybe a lecture on thermonuclear astrophysics and there will be a test at the end. If you don't listen to that, you're screwed. You're not going to do well in the class. You're not going to listen to your friends when they're talking in the lunchroom, you're not going to be able to follow the conversation and you're going to get a headache from the noise in why you are other ear, as well as the constant bombarding of input from all the other people in the room and it can be something that

intense or it can be something as simple as you're in a room with a bunch of people talking to one person and you can hear every single conversation all the way around the room as well as you can hear that person, which is to say not very because you can't filter any of them out.

On the flip side of this, you have extreme tolerance. I don't normally wear sleeves. It's just not a thing I do. I don't get cold until it's below freezing most of the time. And frequently this happens with autistic people. They will have a sense or a perception of a sense, maybe it's not so much temperature as it is cold. I do not do well when it gets warm, but I do really well when it's cold. I don't do well when there's a lot of different noises, but I also don't do well when there's a single noise that's really loud most of the time. So it can be all kinds of things, but understand that your child will likely struggle with where exactly the line is and you will probably struggle as a parent or psychological professional trying to get a kid to put on a coat when they are, in fact, sweating. Understand that, yes, they may have some weird looks thrown their way, but find a balance between what does them harm because of the social repercussions and what does them harm because they're sweating like crazy in a light sweater when it's below freezing.

And the last subject here is meltdowns, which is something I'm sure parents of autistic children are very familiar with. A full meltdown is something that I wouldn't wish on even the bullies that I had in middle school who were formative, shall we say, in my life perspective.

A full meltdown is a horrible experience because it's not just being overwhelmed to the point of exhaustion, it is losing that sense of ending it. I won't say I have the cure to that because I don't. I will ask as caregivers or friends or psychological professionals, please, for the love of God avoid your child or any autistic child having a meltdown if at all possible because as bad as it is for you having to pick them up in the middle of a grocery store it is worse for them. I can promise you that. And I can't give you a this will always work solution, but I can give

you two things that have helped me. I can't claim credit for the second one.

The first is remove the stimuli. This is something that will probably work in almost all cases. If you can separate them from what is causing the meltdown at all, it will help.

The second, much more specific, is ask them about a special interest. This is something that I wouldn't have thought of unless someone very close to me had done it when I was having a meltdown and I have had only -- I can count the number of melt downs I've had in memory on my hands, but they are not something that you forget. And anyone who is able to help you get out of that is someone that is very significant, because that's not something that's easy to find.

Any way, the topic that did not -- not topic. The idea that was used was they asked me about my special interest. Because it is very difficult to stay upset, to stay -- not even upset. It's difficult to do anything but follow that path, even if that means shutting off -- it's a distraction, and it's such a good distraction, even when you don't want it to be that even in such an intense situation as a meltdown, if you can break in and get them to hear that -- you know, tell me about this thing. One of the ones that I hear a lot from parents nowadays is mine craft. Tell me about mine craft. How does this work. Keep asking questions. Stay involved. Make it clear that you are trying to engage them on this because it is not something that happens a lot. And it's one of the reasons it's so important, because it is a pull, the likes of which neurotypicals will likely never experience. And it can work. It may not. I'm not saying that anyone should believe 100 percent that this will work, but give it a shot once or twice and best of luck to you and to whatever poor child is having to go through a meltdown that you would be trying that, because it is not a fun time.

And my last little bit here is social skills, something that's very important to autistic people, something that's very important to teach autistic people. As I said earlier, one of the -- the two biggest breakthroughs for me socially were when I realized first of all that other people responded more

like me than they didn't. And second of all, that people are completely self focused 95 percent of the time. It is easier to explain to an autistic person, at least in my experience, that if they want to have more friends, do nice things for those people. I'm not saying prescribe them with food or anything like that, but make a connection. Because it's as simple as everyone wants to be heard. And whether you really care whether this person had a great day or not is irrelevant. Because you want this person to be happy. Because if they're happy and you made them happy, then they may be your friend. They may like you. It's a bit utilitarian but it comes from a good place. It comes from wanting that person to be happier. And from that angle it's actually from my experience very easy to change the perspective of someone who doesn't have autism from this person is weird and I don't like them to, you know, they're different but it's very clear that they're trying to improve my day. And I really appreciate that.

Give it a shot.

Modeling is super important. If you can say, well, how would it make you feel in a comparable situation. It's a lot easier to understand with the assumption that other people work like you do. Of course this is not entirely true and I in no way mean to say that, but for all our difference, autistic people are people and function in a lot of ways similarly to neurotypicals. It may be a different trigger. It may be instead of, oh, I'm frustrated because this person said they didn't like my shirt, maybe it's this person didn't talk about my special interest. Maybe they were talking about something else. Maybe they were -- those selfish SOB's, whatever it happens to be those same frustrations, same feelings, the joy, the sadness, the anger, the love all are expressed under different circumstances. Find what makes your children happy or sad. Say maybe they felt like you did with this. Autistic people don't lack empathy; they lack automatic empathy. If they understand the situation, they're going to feel bad if you feel bad. But because you are crying, they may walk in say and why are you crying instead of, oh, what's wrong, because they may be thinking, well, maybe

you heard great news or it may just be that they are thinking about a logic puzzle or trains instead of focusing on you because that's not how we're programmed. It takes effort in a way that neurotypical people don't realize. It takes a conscious decision to go down that road. And if it's worth it to the autistic person, they can manage it. I believe in all of you. It's not easy, but it's very possible. And it does take effort. So if you are the parent of an autistic child and they seem to be rude or crass or anything like that, just take it with a grain of salt. Understand they may be trying. And if they're not, it may just be that you aren't either and the levels are naturally different.

Now, social inadequacy is a big thing and it's crucially important for autistic people to have self-esteem. So I recognize to any parents out there -- I think I'm running a little bit close on time here -- to support your child self-esteem however you can. Because it will have huge ripples throughout their life. And deficit mitigation. When I say this, I mean let's talk about one of the more obvious social deficits. Saying something unintentionally rude. If you don't know this other person is going to react poorly to being told their ideas are bad and they should feel bad, not much you can do about that because you didn't know it would be hurtful. If you do know that it's hurtful, however, you might not do it again. Something that I found to be tremendously successful and highly recommend trying both as an autistic person and for autistic people if you are a caregiver, parent, or psychological professional or even a teacher is have them tell their friends and the people they interact with regularly if I say something that's hurtful let me know, because frequently I won't realize and I will apologize if I said something hurtful, but I won't if I don't know. There are a lot of other ways that these deficits can be mitigated and a lot of complex efforts that people have gone through to do so. But there's a lot of books out there for people to read. There's a lot of material written by autistic people for autistic people. Look me in the eye by John elder Robinson. Fantastic book. I also recommend neuro tribes because it's useful to know. Fantastic read. And thanks for

listening. It's really huge to me that I got to come out today and tell my story, talk about this, share a little bit of information and hopefully reach some people. If you want to get in touch with me, my e-mail is [jlcarver@e-mail.wm.edu](mailto:jlcarver@e-mail.wm.edu). Say, hey, I saw your talk. Just get in touch with me if you have any questions or any opportunities for public speaking. This is what I want to do with my life and I hope that I've helped a couple people with what they can do for their people, for their autistic people.

Thank you for having me and hope you have a wonderful day.