

Being Late Diagnosed Means

Being late diagnosed means that when you're five, you're carrying around a blankie and getting called a baby. It doesn't help that you also suck your thumb. Now that your secret is out, you're not only a baby, but a big baby. Since you've always been sensitive, you cry—and now, and forever, you're the crybaby. It's also the year your sister is born, and she's a real handful from the start. You learn to become the easy, helpful, responsible big sister so you don't cause your parents any more stress.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're six, your teacher asks the class if they should read a book or practice spelling words. Knowing your mom said you needed more practice because spelling is something you struggle with, you tell the teacher you want to practice spelling. The whole class yells at you for choosing something boring instead of the fun book. You cry because everyone's hateful attention is on you, when all you wanted was to become a better speller. The teacher makes the class apologize, but you can still see the resentment all over their faces.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're seven, and your best friend moves away, you have no one else in class that you're close to. You spend most of the year alone, teaching yourself cursive and the sign language alphabet instead of socializing with your peers.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're eight, you have a frenemy. Since you don't understand social cues, you think this is your best friend. What you don't realize is how mean

they are to you—how their words go over your head or are delivered with such sweet venom that you stay oblivious. You don't know how mean they are behind your back, how they talk badly about you to others, and encourage them to be mean to you, too. When you actually break a bone in their presence, they walk away as if nothing happened.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're nine, you start noticing that people-pleasing makes others happy, and you like the praise. You become a model student, following all the rules to a T and helping teachers and staff with errands. You also notice that memorizing Bible verses and stories earns you recognition at church, so you become a biblical encyclopedia.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're ten, you sit in PE observing how the other girls dress and act. You soak it in, trying to mimic them so maybe they'll like you. You still get laughed at. No one is telling you how to do these "socially normal" things—you're just trying to figure it out on your own, because most of the kids in your class don't really care for you. Around this time, you discover your love for reading and often immerse yourself in books instead of socializing.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're eleven, you're learning how to do your makeup for the first time, with no guidance other than your mother and what you've observed at sleepovers. You're made fun of for your blue eyeshadow and told you look like Mimi from The Drew Carey Show. You finally get to join Youth Group, only to feel like everyone is annoyed by your presence—ignored and talked down to constantly.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're twelve, you move to a new school and discover your love for choir and theatre. You become obsessed with memorizing lines and lyrics. You navigate a bigger school with new kids and different rules, feeling like a fish out of water.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're thirteen and starting to use social media, you take pictures of yourself and are told you're conceited. In reality, you're staring at those photos not in admiration, but in criticism—tearing yourself apart. You see an overweight girl with an overbite and few friends. You wonder why boys don't like you and start placing far too much value on likes on Facebook.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're fourteen and fifteen and extremely sick, people start to distance themselves because "you've changed," even though you've been in and out of the hospital. With already-existing sensory issues, adding daily severe stomach pain for almost a year makes you not very fun to be around. This is when you get your first boyfriend—who only dates you because he's already asked out all your friends. You say yes because you're scared no boy will ever pay attention to you. He makes you nervous the entire time and breaks up with you in the middle of your health crisis.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're sixteen and get your first serious boyfriend, you latch on because the thought of ending up alone terrifies you. You fall hard and fast because you don't think it will ever happen again. You're "too much" for everyone—that's what your last boyfriend said. It's also the year you're kicked off the worship team because of other girls'

behavior. When you ask why, you're met with outrage that you would question the decision. All you wanted was clarity.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're seventeen, you're at church camp and learn that one of the boys is telling your boyfriend how ugly you are and asking why he's dating you—the same boy who bullied you your entire childhood. It's also the year you can't fully enjoy your senior year because you start college classes early and drift away from your friend group, missing out on choir and the activities you loved.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're eighteen and working fast food, you're really good at it because you pay attention to detail and follow protocol like it's a religion. They repeatedly ask you to become a manager. You say no at first so you can focus on school, but eventually you agree because you're a people pleaser and love the praise that makes you feel worthwhile and purposeful.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're nineteen and move in with your first adult boyfriend, he hangs up your clothes while you're in class, thinking he's being sweet. But he uses the wrong hangers, and you panic and correct him instead of thanking him. He looks at you like you're crazy for caring so much about hangers. You begin to realize you see the world very differently from most people. Something must be wrong with you.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're twenty-one, you marry someone you realize you don't really know. You later understand you were love-bombed and manipulated. The marriage

doesn't even last five months before you find a way out, and the divorce is messy and emotionally exhausting.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're twenty-two, you graduate late, land a job, and then COVID hits three months later. You wear a mask that feels suffocating while trying to follow all the rules and guidelines, all while navigating your first year as a teacher in a non-supportive environment.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're twenty-three, you take the first job that hires you out of fear of unemployment, only to end up in one of the roughest schools in the district. You experience verbal and physical abuse and begin anxiety medication and therapy because you're having daily panic attacks. You understand suicidal thoughts for the first time.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're twenty-four, you learn your blood pressure is dangerously high and you're on the verge of diabetes. You respond by becoming extremely rigid—strict calorie counting, strict daily exercise, and eating the same chicken, broccoli, and rice lunch for three years. You punish yourself whenever you fall short.

Being late diagnosed means that when you're twenty-seven, your sister announces at Thanksgiving that she thinks she's autistic. Suddenly, you start questioning everything you thought you knew about yourself. You revisit every year of your life, analyzing your behaviors and memories. You tell yourself there's no way you could be autistic—you did well in school, you have friends, and you don't stim. But slowly, connections form: the blankets, the

thumb-sucking, the confusion with jokes, the strict routines. You still worry you're wasting a doctor's time by getting tested.

Being diagnosed at twenty-eight means your entire view of the world changes. You move through the stages of grief—denial, then anger. Anger at your parents for missing the signs. Anger at the kids who bullied you. Anger at jobs that dismissed you and partners who misunderstood you. Anger at yourself for not knowing sooner. Then comes depression—the grief for the younger version of you who was ostracized and misunderstood. You grieve the help you never received and the life you might have had.

Being diagnosed at twenty-eight also means you finally begin to accept yourself. You start unmasking. You read books about autism, emotional intelligence, and healing your nervous system. You realize you've been silently stimming for years and begin allowing yourself to move in ways that feel natural. You discover weighted blankets, fidget toys, and pressure hugs. You recognize that what you thought was teacher burnout is actually autistic burnout and that the classroom environment is overwhelming for you.

Being diagnosed at twenty-eight means having honest, uncomfortable conversations—with yourself and with others. You begin to stop people-pleasing and start prioritizing your needs. You feel selfish at first, even though you've spent your whole life putting yourself last.

Being diagnosed at twenty-eight means you look toward twenty-nine wondering who you are and what you want. You try to reconnect with the younger version of yourself who once felt happy and curious. You reflect on your mistakes and acknowledge you did the best you could with what you had. You learn to check in with yourself daily, to move your body, to accept that your best looks different every day, and to surround yourself with people who genuinely support you.

Being late diagnosed gave you a rough beginning, but being diagnosed gives you a way forward. It gives you language, validation, and tools. Life may always be harder for you than it is for others, but now you understand why. You're not just "too sensitive" or "too much." You're autistic—and finally, you know how to care for yourself in a world that never taught you how.