

# Adulting on the Spectrum: Ignoring haters, not masking anymore and skydiving

## **Andrew M. Komarow**

Welcome to "Adulting on the Spectrum." I am Andrew Komarow an autistic Certified Financial Planner. I co-run "Adulting on the Spectrum," with Eileen Lamb. Hey, Eileen.

## **Eileen Lamb**

Hey Andrew. I'm Eileen Lamb, I co-run this podcast with Andrew. And in this podcast, we want to highlight real voices of autistic adults, not just inspirational stories, but real people talking about their life. Basically, we want to give a voice to people like us. And today, our guest is Ryan Lee.

## **Andrew M. Komarow**

Hi, Ryan. Hey, Ryan, do you want to introduce yourself or

## **Ryan Lee**

Hi, I'm Ryan, I was diagnosed with autism when I was three years old. At first I didn't want to go when I learned about it, I didn't want to believe it. I was trying to be like everyone else most of my life. But I when I learned to accept it, I started being more comfortable my own skin, being myself and try to put myself out there more. And I felt good. I've written several articles for Autism Speaks and another platform over the last couple years, met new people on the spectrum along the way through them. I've been trying to aim to make a difference for the whole autism community.

## **Eileen Lamb**

Yeah, we've seen some of your articles. They're really great. And, you know, we like to ask our guests if they have a preference and how's they identify? So do you like an autistic person a person who has autism? Or does it not matter to you?

## **Ryan Lee**

Um, autistic or person on the spectrum? I I'm not, I don't know if I have a preference. But I want people to know that I do have autism. That's a real thing.

## **Eileen Lamb**

Do you want to tell us more about your diagnosis? You were diagnosed at three, which is pretty early? And yeah, what was it like for you growing up on the spectrum?

## **Ryan Lee**

You see, well, even before I knew I was diagnosed to me, and I always knew I was different. Like, I always felt like an oddball. By my peers, always wondering why couldn't be accepted or why I couldn't fit in, you know, it was really hard growing up, to be honest, like trying to be like everyone else. Like, I always felt like my parents, like, they knew I had autism, but always pushed me to be better than everyone else, or I remember saying to myself, my odd behavior. Like it was the pressure just became too much. And sometimes I had meltdowns.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Now, your parents, you were diagnosed with autism, when you were three, but you didn't know that you were autistic until you were 14. How did you find out? How did your parents tell you and what do you wish, could have been done differently? If anything? What went well, what didn't?

**Ryan Lee**

I don't, I don't remember what how they told me. But I knew I hope when I was 14. Well, I, but I knew when I found out I just didn't know what to say. I felt like it was too much. I felt like I was too different. I wanted people to accept me. So, I tried to be like everyone else trying to be accepted. But apparently it didn't turn out so well sometimes, because sometimes I acted out when I felt like no one was listening to me.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Do you wish that you had known that you were autistic earlier? Or are you happy with that?

**Ryan Lee**

Yes.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Okay, and why?

**Ryan Lee**

Because I did see on the news. One time, a kid, I don't know remember his name, but he told his elementary school classmates about it, his having autism. And they listen. And if I knew that maybe I would have gotten my classmates to listen to me more, and accept me more and learn and start educating people about autism. But it was back in the 90s. Like, autism wasn't very aware much back in the 90s.

**Eileen Lamb**

How did their behavior change towards you once they knew you were autistic?

**Ryan Lee**

When I told my friends that only few people when I was in high school, only a few people knew I was on the spectrum. And they treated me okay and well. But there are a few of my classmates who, who I suppose I didn't seem right. They call me the R word, retard. And that made me so mad. And I didn't.

And there was just one football player who was taller than me, who called me the R word too many times. And I kind of told him about that I got so mad, I kicked him. And I got in trouble for it. But I felt like it was worth it. Because like, the R word is very offensive to people on the spectrum or others with disabilities.

**Eileen Lamb**

But I totally understand where you're coming from, especially when you're being bullied. So often, like every day, I mean, that's...

**Ryan Lee**

The R word is my trigger word. You know, once someone calls me, it just gets my disorder, like my adrenaline just flows through me and I just get so mad.

**Eileen Lamb**

I get it, you know, and it's not fair.

**Ryan Lee**

No, it isn't.

**Eileen Lamb**

I know you know, I've read some of your articles and you're talking about masking and what is it like for you? Do you feel like you still mask a lot that there are things that you don't do just because you try to fit in?

**Ryan Lee**

Oh, I did do mask used to mask a lot but I'm tired. Don't do it anymore, because I'm tired of wearing a mask. I don't want to live in a world where I don't get to be who I am. Yeah, nobody does. Nobody wants.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

So you describe yourself as an autism advocate? What does advocacy mean to you? Right? Because I think there's talking about your experiences. But there's a lot more to advocacy than just you. How would you describe advocacy? What does it mean to you?

**Ryan Lee**

It means like sharing your your opinions or yourself, with other people to get them to understand. To get them to connect, and show the work to put yourself out there for the world to understand. I mean, how is the world supposed to change? If we don't do anything about it if we don't start talking?

**Andrew M. Komarow**

But wouldn't you say that advocacy is about a lot more than just talking? Right? Because...

**Ryan Lee**

Like doing. Doing like, there, there is the autism walk, which I never actually done before. But I'm considering doing it for the first time this year.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

But what I mean is, you know, like, talking about something is not just about, you know, sharing your story, it's about sharing your story to impact and influence others to advocate for more than yourself to advocate for, you know, others to try and make change, right? We got introduced from a mutual connection, who's, you know, a professional advocate who helps, you know, enact laws and changes to make lives better for all autistic people. And not everyone can make laws and, you know, have that large impact. But is advocacy to you sharing your story? Or is there a part of advocacy, you know, that you're very passionate about and that you really want to change? Or is it just more the general perception of autism?

**Ryan Lee**

Well, I want to do more than just share my story and share my personal experiences. Why? Because I know I'm not the person who feels the same way I do that, that faces unfair treatment. Like I just it's like me telling them that we autistics we feel emotions much more intensely than our neurotypical. Like, for example, I wrote in my last article, how it is of heartbreak, you know, being done by friend. Like, when my heart hurts, I go into this blinding rage. And sometimes say, I don't mean. And anger angry or harsh things. I try to make you understand that we autistics we have feelings to just feel much more template, and we need to be understood. And we need to feel like we're being heard. Trying when I'm upset, or when something I would do like being done by Fred. I have a hard time expressing myself without anger. Because I'm not trying to hide how I feel. The thing about feelings is that sometimes they change is that what's what makes them so interesting, but you can't deny that you feel feelings? Because they'll just end up feeling worse. You know what I mean?

**Eileen Lamb**

Have you tried writing your feelings? I know that...

**Ryan Lee**

I do. I do sometimes write a diary.

**Eileen Lamb**

How does it feel?

**Ryan Lee**

Yeah, it feels good to write down my feelings.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

And oh, you are a person of color. And not just that you're an autistic person as well. How do you feel knowing that maybe some of your aggression and or meltdowns could be taken in not the best way?

Maybe with some bias? I can't imagine what it would be like to be in your shoes, just like neurotypical can't imagine what it's like to be in our shoes. But do you have any advice on that specifically? Or, you know, what goes through your head or, or anything else to help others out there?

**Ryan Lee**

Yeah, since you said about color, people need to understand that autism just doesn't affect whites. It affects us people of color too, it affects, all races, not just one-white. People can be so shallow, sometime when it comes to race.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

And do you have any concerns? You know, potentially having a meltdown in interactions with police? I've heard concerns from other, you know, other parents and other individuals? Or do you have any advice or?

**Ryan Lee**

Well, the thing is, I have a, I did get a card, so to show police that I'm on the autism spectrum. But the thing is police should be trained to handle those with autism, because there is somebody with autism that have meltdowns in their police and police don't want to handle it. Like have you ever have you heard of this guy named Matthew Rushin, who was unfairly in prison?

**Eileen Lamb**

Yeah. That was such a sad story.

**Ryan Lee**

That was a a prime example of that. Police did a training on those how to handle those autism. Yeah, unfairly. I can't imagine how Matthew felt being in prison. It was so it must have been so horrible. Yeah, trust me. Have you seen a jail cell? It's disgusting.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

I have yes. I have. So I remember when I was younger we toured a jail cell and I think I must have been like five and they said it was like a local like jail cell and like the suburbs, but they said that they fed them McDonald's. And I got really excited except like, oh McDonald's, like, Oh, I want to McDonald's. I want to go yeah. And that that idea quickly faded.

**Ryan Lee**

Yeah. Well, I wouldn't get too excited about that. Because one of my friends and friends like, or somebody for this group of men has been in prison before. And I can't go into detail. But he but he said seriously the summer before. He said, look, I've been in prison. It's not fun in there. And I am sure Matthew would say not to.

**Eileen Lamb**

I can't imagine it's fun. I think that's the point, right? You don't want to go there.

**Ryan Lee**

That's my friend Daniel. As Daniel would say it's not fun in there.

**Eileen Lamb**

I can't imagine I mean, just like the quarantine was hard. So can you imagine being in prison? And having no freedom is just crazy,

**Ryan Lee**

Like a jail false. Nothing Not to mention, there's a toilet in the middle of the room. I know,

**Eileen Lamb**

But speaking of prison, have you heard that Wentworth Miller, who was the actor that played in Prison Break? I don't know if you've seen that TV show, but he just came out as autistic. Sounds weird to say came out, but he was diagnosed with autism. He's awesome. And it's he was in his 40s when he was diagnosed. And yeah, it's really, really cool to see more people getting diagnosed as adults. Do you think there is advantages to getting a diagnosis as a child, as opposed to as an adult? Like, are you happy you got the diagnosis?

**Ryan Lee**

Well, I guess when you're diagnosed late as an adult, like, I guess you, you'd feel bad that you didn't have the help you had as a kid, and you're struggling now since life is harder. But when you're a kid people found out they have been able to help you as you grow up, like sometimes when you start to do things right the first time. And I'm not the type of person that likes perfection, I just want people to appreciate my effort, you know, even if it's not enough to them.

**Eileen Lamb**

See, that's a good advocacy thing. I feel like telling people that we're doing our best, they can't expect from us what they would expect from a neurotypical person, and we all have our differences in what we can do and cannot do even you know, on the spectrum, we're all different from each other. And just because, you know, and it's the person who could do that doesn't mean that we can do it, too. And that's,

**Ryan Lee**

But it's like saying, that's a typical autism thing, right? Just because we have the same disorder doesn't mean we see things the same way. That's, that's one of the harshest realities I face on something we all face is that we can be very different from people we're supposed to relate to.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Yeah, like, just like that, you know, there may be a little relation that you have, because you know, because you have autism, but your autism is not like Eileen son's autism, or even, you know, each son and you know, Charlie and Jude, their autism is just so very different. It's not the same. There's some

in common and sometimes it's just because we're human, we have things in common. Sometimes it's the autism that's in common,

**Ryan Lee**

Like how is Eileen son's autism different?

**Eileen Lamb**

Well, you know, like, my eldest son, Charlie is eight and is so severe that he can't talk or communicate, be independent. He's, you know, self harms, all of that. And my youngest son, like, honestly, it's hard, even hard to tell he is on the spectrum, just like me, because he talks so well, and he has a lot of strength. And it's hidden. It's really an invisible disability, you know, and for people like Charlie my son, like, they might never be able to advocate for himself and live an independent life. And the spectrum is broad. And we don't talk enough about the severe side.

**Ryan Lee**

Yeah, but just because you can't see our autism doesn't mean we don't have challenges. It's like, I've encountered some people telling me that I don't look autistic. And that makes me mad, and I tell them, well, how am I supposed to look then?

**Eileen Lamb**

Yeah. Yeah, I don't like it either. When people tell me that just because I can talk and I'm somewhat successful, but like, I can't go to the grocery store to buy milk. It's I just can't do it. Grocery stores to me are like hell, or like, I can't maintain a friendship, you know, all of these things.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Well, that just might be because you're mean, Eileen, I don't know if that has to do with autism (all chuckle) Sorry I'm being a little sarcastic there.

**Eileen Lamb**

Sarcasam.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Yeah, I should probably do a little less sarcasm on an autistic podcast, but some people are very, you know, sarcastic. So there we go. Everyone's different. But so I've seen you before, or in some of your other articles talk about how, you know, the online community can be full, filled, have lots of hate, as Eileen would say. Or really anyone would say. And you seem to be just a genuinely nice person who really just wants to help people spread awareness. And I'm saying that because I wish we had more of that. Right? So what other advice can you give to others who are looking to get share a positive message, but in doing so, they're being attacked?

**Ryan Lee**

Yep. So just try to be yourself. And if you can't ignore the haters, then well, I don't know. But still keep trying and push to keep on going.

**Eileen Lamb**

And that's pretty good advice. Keep on going and you ignore the hate.

**Ryan Lee**

Like, how is this world supposed to change that we don't fight?

**Eileen Lamb**

Do you ever get hate online?

**Ryan Lee**

There were a few times but I ignored it. I ignored because I didn't want to cause internet war if I responded, even though I really wanted to. Okay, because when I get hate sometimes I want to insult the person back.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

How did you ignore it. You act like it was like a matter of like it was so easy to ignore it. I think it's one of the hardest things for me to do. Eileen doesn't ignore it at all.

**Eileen Lamb**

Not anymore.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Not anymore. And that's not a bad thing either. But for others who want to ignore it. What advice can you give?

**Ryan Lee**

Sometimes? Yeah, I feel like fight back when necessary, you know, just fine. Take out something, I'll put them into place. But if not, you're gonna you can only ignore stuff for so long, you know?

**Eileen Lamb**

Well, yeah, that's exactly the thing. Yeah, I feel like, for a few years, I was able to, like, ignore it. And after a while, it's just like, what's that expression with the tea party that's exploding, or I don't know. But like, after a while, you know, it just starts to come out and you're..

**Ryan Lee**

In high school, like, I can only ignore insults so much, that they're like, sometimes I even attack someone. When they call me like that. I told you, and there are others I attacked because they kept calling me the R word saying mean things about me. And my teachers told me to ignore it. But I tell them, I can't ignore it. But they just don't know. They don't care, they don't listen.

**Eileen Lamb**

Yeah. Oh, it sees your you know, easier to say when you're not the one like being subjected to the insults and the hate. Like, well ignore it. You know, it seems so easy, but when you're the one who's getting the the hate it's not easy to do. I mean, I know I have a hard time ignoring it. I just feel the need to like defend myself and tell people how they're wrong. They are wrong.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

I'm never wrong. Eileen, I don't know why you keep telling me that. So. Okay, sarcasm again. See, I can't stop it. So, Ryan, um, you know, a lot of people with autism, you know, autism is not their entire lives that there's nothing wrong with your being an autism autistic advocate. Is that what you're looking to do as far as you know, college and career or do you have you know, other passions to support your advocacy you're like Temple Grandin or even John Elder Robison with his you know, car business. Temple Grandin with animals or are you making advocacy your your true focus?

**Ryan Lee**

Well advocacy, is not my true focus. I'm just trying to focus on my life. I've done with college a long time ago. Mostly I'm done with school. I'm just working right now trying to figure out my life. But also I want to enjoy my life, most of all, like and do things and take risks. I mean, at the beginning of the year, I went skydiving for the first time.

**Eileen Lamb**

Well, that's cool.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

I hate heights. How was skydiving?

**Ryan Lee**

I showed the entire world even autistic and take chances without severe consequences.

**Eileen Lamb**

Yeah, I could never do it. How was it?

**Ryan Lee**

It was awesome. One of the best moments of my life falling through the air. Like so scary. It felt so fast and fun.

**Eileen Lamb**

Were you scared?

**Ryan Lee**

Nope.

**Eileen Lamb**

That's cool. Just thinking about it. Oh, my God.

**Ryan Lee**

I wasn't scared. Oh, I was so ready for it because I wanted to take that chance now I can cross off my bucket list.

**Eileen Lamb**

That's true. What's what's on your what else is on your bucket list?

**Ryan Lee**

Skiing, because I really want to learn to ski.

**Eileen Lamb**

What state do you live in?

**Ryan Lee**

Georgia.

**Eileen Lamb**

Georgia.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Is there much snow in Georgia? Where would you go to ski?

**Ryan Lee**

Colorado.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Okay, have you ever been to Colorado?

**Ryan Lee**

Well, while traveling to Utah, I have been to the Denver airport. But I haven't been outside of the state.

**Eileen Lamb**

And one more thing, Ryan, we saw that you, you like poetry? Is that? Is that something you do for a living or...

**Ryan Lee**

It's just a little hobby. I do just to express myself. I like to share it on open mic nights, at this place on the first second Monday of each month. Or was it the first Monday? I like to find ways to express myself.

**Eileen Lamb**

How have people receive the received it? Have you heard good feedback?

**Ryan Lee**

Yeah, good feedback a lot.

**Eileen Lamb**

That's nice. Okay, well, we always finish our podcast by asking quickfire questions. You just give me the first answer that comes to your mind. You'll see it's very easy. What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

**Ryan Lee**

That is kind of hard because, I received lots of advice. You know, the best advice I can have like we all make mistakes. And the best thing is learn from it. Not hold yourself back because of it.

**Eileen Lamb**

Very good. What do you like to do to relax?

**Ryan Lee**

I like to just read, listen to music, watch YouTube videos, and play games with my friends.

**Eileen Lamb**

What's your favorite book about autism?

My favorite book about autism? I don't know I've read a lot of autism. But Kerry Magro's book is one of my favorite books so far.

**Eileen Lamb**

Oh, he would love to hear it. What's your favorite food?

**Ryan Lee**

Pizza.

**Eileen Lamb**

And your favorite movie?

**Ryan Lee**

I like a lot of movies. But one of my top favorite movies in Disney is Descendants. Because of their they show up children from the worst Disney villains ever. And children from the Disney heroes because I'm a huge Disney fan.

**Eileen Lamb**

Well Ryan, thank you so much for joining us today. Do you want to tell people where they can find you online?

**Ryan Lee**

Yeah, you can look on me on Facebook or on Instagram. My username is rymar101. And I have Twitter. And I have my own website called RyansHeart.wordpress.com You can find all my socials there.

**Eileen Lamb**

Awesome. Thank you so much, Ryan, for joining us today.

**Ryan Lee**

And I thank you for your time. I really enjoyed it.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Thank you.

**Eileen Lamb**

Bye!