

Adulthood on the Spectrum: Golden retrievers and simple rules to be an advocate

Andrew M. Komarow

Welcome to "Adulthood on the Spectrum," I'm Andrew Komarow, autistic certified financial planner, I co-run "Adulthood on the Spectrum," with Eileen Lamb.

Eileen Lamb

Hey everyone, I'm Eileen Lamb. And in this podcast, we want to highlight real voices of autistic adults, not just inspirational stories, but also real people talking about their boring life, basically want to give a voice to people like us.

Andrew M. Komarow

So today, our guest is Liz Nichols. I think I said that correct?

Liz Michaels

Yeah, it's Michaels.

Andrew M. Komarow

Sorry. That's what I thought at first, but then I tried too hard. And got so far. No, I'm just kidding. Okay. Even before the doctors told Liz Michaels parents, they had little faith, she could take the normal route through school, she knew something about her was different. When the diagnosis of autism came. She knew what that was. From that point on. Liz made one of her goals in life to help autistic people like herself advocate and understand the world that is autism. Now a college graduate with a certification in early childhood education, she is able to practice patience and kindness and service to the goal every single day. Thank you for joining us.

Liz Michaels

Thank you. Thank you for having me. It means a lot.

Eileen Lamb

Hey Liz. Thanks for joining us, we start by asking all our guests what pronouns they prefer? You know, she her he, him they. Anything. And also, what's your autism identity? Is it person with autism? On the spectrum? Autistic? Do you have any preference? Or do you not care?

Liz Michaels

Um, so I'm she and her, those are my pronouns. And I kind of like to mix it up a little bit like somebody with autism, autistic, that kind of thing. I mean, like I said, again, mixing it up. So it doesn't matter. Like

what anyone really says just, you know, if autism is a part of who I am, so as long as that's in the vocabulary that it works for me.

Andrew M. Komarow

Thank you for that.

Liz Michaels

Yeah.

Andrew M. Komarow

When were you diagnosed with autism?

Liz Michaels

So back in, I want to say I was three years old back in, like, 1992. Um, they didn't really know exactly what there was very little like research with autism. So they called it like a severe delay. And, but it was, autism was just coming out as I was getting diagnosed, but they still were calling it a severe delay. So I kind of as I went through school, you know, they just kept saying, like, Oh, this is a delay. This is a delay. And at one point, I saw one doctor, and at the time, I saw a doctor. And at one point, the new thing at the time was bipolar disorder, where bipolar disorder was really coming out. So I got diagnosed with that. And, you know, my mom, and both my parents were like, let's get it like a second opinion. And, sure enough, I, I got a doctor I clicked with, he said, this isn't bipolar. This is an ADHD. This is what at the time they call it, Asperger Syndrome, but I know they also now call it high functioning autism. And he said, This is exactly what I'm seeing. And just from there, like, he didn't make it, like uncomfortable or anything, if anything, you know, he just said this is, you know, this is a part of you, you know, and just kept moving me for it. I saw him up until I was in college. So, but it was it was when I got to that doctor, he was very positive and tried to be look at the bright outcome of things.

Eileen Lamb

What, uh, what were your struggles when you were a child? What made the the doctors, your parents, you feel different? How did you know?

Liz Michaels

I so I was like, in ninth grade, I was like, sitting in my classroom. And just, I would try to have like, conversations with my peers, and just something just wasn't clicking like, so the social interactions. Like, I felt like I had to try really, really hard to get attention from my peers and like friendships. And then I would also like, because I wasn't looked at, I was being looked at differently. I sat alone a lot at like, lunchtime, or like, I had a friend. But I also knew like some of the stuff like the I noticed I had to be like on a routine at all times. Um, luckily my mom is a school teacher. And she's worked with she worked with children on the spectrum. She knows she knew like, okay, she really needs the routine. Another thing is also I wasn't catching up to Understanding like, kind of like the basics of the world, if that makes sense, like, you know, like, you know, conversation sarcasm, that kind of thing. So like

social cues were really off. I was also having like motor, it motor difficulty, like I had to work with an OT in school. And also just I noticed when if something mean was said to me, I had a really hard time shaking it off. Like, it's like, for me a peer could be like, I don't care what you said, what you say to me, but for me, it's like, it took like a week to get over it, if that makes sense.

Eileen Lamb

Oh, yeah, it does. Yeah. I can relate to that.

Liz Michaels

Yes. Yeah.

Andrew M. Komarow

I agree, very sensitive. And I know saying that helps. Sorry.

Eileen Lamb

I don't know if like an autism thing, but yeah, I feel like pretty sensitive or like, oh, I'll never forget if someone... I won't forget you just said that.

Andrew M. Komarow

You see, there you go

Eileen Lamb

On November 4 at 5:44. Andrew said that I'm very sensitive. And I never forget. (all laugh)

Liz Michaels

No, I I do agree. And that's something like right now I'm kind of like not researching, but kind of figuring out like, like, are people with autism? Is, are they body sensitive? Like, are they just do they have a sensitivity? That maybe some people don't have? Like? That is a question like I go, I could like, and I don't look at it in negative or positive. Just like a question. Like, I'm wondering.

Andrew M. Komarow

So, so speaking of that, you know, talking about, you know, thinking about autism in general, um, you're an autism advocate, but what does it mean for you to be an autism advocate?

Liz Michaels

So for me, what it means for me to be an autism advocate is respecting everybody on the spectrum. And just whether you're low, you're high, or you're in between, like, you know, and also respecting everybody stories, like, you know, not it, say, like, for me, if you've met somebody with, if you've met me, and I have autism, you've met me, and I have autism, like, but I'm not the only story out there, like everybody's stories, like need to be heard. And for me, being an advocate, it's just respecting everybody, and just being kind and, you know, showing the world like introducing other people, introducing other peers who have autism, as well, just so for me, being an advocate is being a selfless

person, and just getting to understand other people who are on the spectrum, whether it's on the lower end, or the higher end, or in the like, in the middle.

Eileen Lamb

What, uh, what type of autism advocacy do you do? Do you do social media? Do you do anything else outside of social media?

Liz Michaels

I do social media. I also I also, as you can see, I have my t-shirt on, it's "Grow Your Awareness." Um, I do, I just, I really do talk about autism. I'm at my job, I'm a cafe attendant at Christina's Kitchen. They're very supportive of autism advocacy. And one of the things that I do is I wear my t-shirts. I also blog as well, too, too. And I just get that voice out there. Like I participate in discussion boards, like, especially on social media, I share my story whenever I can, or like, I also write to family, different families who, you know, who may have just gotten a diagnosis or just, you know, or that are they're living with a diagnosis, like, I'm just gonna, I'm all over the place like I, I do whatever I can, and I participate in any time, anything I can to be an advocate.

Eileen Lamb

I like your shirt. What do you think of the puzzle piece? I mean, I can't answer my own question. But,

Liz Michaels

Um, so for me, the puzzle piece to me, is not a negative thing, necessarily. I just look at it as a piece of my life on a piece of my life. Like that's part of my big puzzle, like so I just look at it as like autism. Okay, is here's my piece piece of the puzzle. Here's autism. And then it's like the, the 1000s of other pieces that go along with Liz, but autism just happens to be one of the pieces if that makes sense.

Eileen Lamb

Yep.

Liz Michaels

I don't, I don't look, I do respect other people who may not like it, but for me, I like it. I look at it as a positive thing.

Andrew M. Komarow

I mean, that sounds like a really good way just to go about things that there, are

Liz Michaels

Yes,

Andrew M. Komarow

people who are different and just that, you know, you respect them. And, you know, I That doesn't sound like a lot to ask.

Liz Michaels

Exactly.

Andrew M. Komarow

How do you and so one thing I want to ask about so you have a golden golden retriever. Tell us more.

Liz Michaels

Oh yes, so the story of the story of Bo, he's five years old now, but about five years ago, my parents were like, okay, we're ready to get a new dog we had just settled in our home. And so they went to a breeder and they said, Look, we have a daughter who is autistic, and we really need a dog who will show love, compassion, and just, you know, if she's sad, or has like a, like a, like a meltdown, you know, somebody who a dog that will just be comforting, and she's like, I'm on it, like, and so she brought over bow, and me and him just clicked immediately. Like, he was up, he was one of the friendliest pups ever. And then, as he got older, you know, I, there were times where I did have like, would cry or have like a meltdown or got stressed out, and I tell you what, that dog knows when you're sad. He comes and sits right on top of your feet and doesn't move until you are done crying, you're done being upset. He's such a great dog. Like, some people have asked me, you know, like, have you ever thought about making him your guide dog? And I haven't. And the reason is, he's just one of those things. Let's like, one of my self care tools, though, like, I'm sad, I go over, give them a pet. Every day after work, whether it's been stressful or not still, the dog is there waiting, like he's waiting there for you. So having him is has been a great tool and a great self care tool. I'm having him and I love walking him love, love just having him around. Because at the end of the day, I know that dog loves me. Whether I'm autistic or not, you know, he he's just always there and he's nice not judgmental, he just loves.

Andrew M. Komarow

I you know, there's a joke that if you take like, you know, a friend, a spouse or somebody and you take your dog and you just lock them in the trunk of your car for an hour and you come back the dog doesn't care why you left. It's just happy you're back. Eileen would not be so happy if I locked her in the trunk of the car for an hour. (all laugh)

Eileen Lamb

Uh, I don't know its pretty cozy in there.

Andrew M. Komarow

Until the dog pees all over you, too, so

Liz Michaels

Yeah. But yes, he's been a very he's been a very good companion to have as a dog. And like I said, if if I am having a meltdown, or like an anxiety attack, he never judges he just comes over wags his tail.

He's like, I'm gonna sit here and I'm gonna wait till you feel better and that's what he does. That's what he does for me and my whole family but he's he's been a big help for me.

Eileen Lamb

That's good. We have a golden to I don't know I feel like golden are just they're the best dogs. I mean, I love my Yorkie but, George our golden, he's just there's something I feel like they're just like here to make humans happy. Like you can tell like that. They just want to make you happy. You know, they're,

Liz Michaels

Yes.

Eileen Lamb

such there's Yeah. So such good natured. I think that's the expression.

Liz Michaels

Yes. Yeah.

Eileen Lamb

You want to go back to your diagnosis? Because, you know, my kids are at school now. And Charlie has high needs, and is really struggling at school, despite, you know, being in a special needs classroom. He's already at his second school of the year. I mean, I know you follow me. But I'm curious because you were diagnosed in the 90s. Is that right?

Liz Michaels

Yeah, I was diagnosed in the early 90s.

Eileen Lamb

So how was that at school? Like, did they provide any support after your diagnosis? Was there anything they did? That didn't turn out? So good? Like, tell us about it?

Liz Michaels

So I did. So some education. So with some teachers, there was positivity. Music, especially one of my favorite classes was music. And as you know, I I love music. So that was a really helpful tool. They also gave me I also met with the school psychologist frequently. And he was really helpful too, as well. But um, but one thing that really like clicked with my really clicked with me, and I can tell you to this day, was my occupational therapist who came to see me up. And what was cool as I didn't even know, she was my occupational therapist. To me. I was like, Oh, it's my friend. It's my friend coming to visit me and it was just it was just so cool. Because she would come she would help me she would write it helped me right. Learn to hold a pencil, practice my cursive, but the most thing I did struggle with in elementary school was tying, tying my shoes and cutting. And like some of my teachers I'm not gonna lie, got very frustrated with me. As um, and you know, I do see it sometimes with teachers they get frustrated with they don't have patience. I mean, everyone has a bad day. But as a teacher, I do

feel like, you know, if you know, somebody is struggling, like you got to just, you know, keep it together. So, when I would tell her, Hey, when my mom would tell , be my voice at my IEP meetings, she would say, this is the top two things Liz was struggling with right now are tying her shoes. And cutting. So my OT, and I'm not gonna lie to you like 20 some years later, I still tie my shoes to this day, the way she taught me. And I'm just she was definitely one person that never gave up on me. Another school teacher, another teacher that didn't give up on me was my music teacher. In elementary school, she knew I loved the music. And she actually we still keep in touch to this day. And she I even told her, I said, Thank you so much for, you know, introducing me to music because that's one of my passions is like, looking is researching artists and listening to music and learning different tunes, and, you know, genres, like without, without music, like I could I can't even begin to fathom. But in school though, I definitely struggled. I did, there was an incident incident where I'm left handed. And so the one student teacher took the pencil out of my hand and shoved into my right hand and was like, You need to use your right hand, because I was the only left hander in the classroom. So I did have struggles I did have, you know, I did have some teachers who would I the role and just like, they don't have time for this, but in the end with the negativity, it's made me one of the reasons why want to be a voice for those with autism, because in the end, they they need people to not give up on them. They're struggling themselves. They need somebody to like be their backup. They're like, fall, if that makes sense. Yeah.

Eileen Lamb

What's up, go ahead.

Liz Michaels

But that's but definitely one of the the tools that really helped me in school was, I also did have a lovely speech teacher too. And when I did leave Elementary School, both of them, like just hug me and like, wish me well. But after elementary school, like it was like, the services kind of stopped, and I'm not gonna lie, I think that's kind of wrong. Like, it doesn't just stop at elementary school. It doesn't stop at age 18. Like, I my firm belief is services should be available for everybody.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, I mean, that would be ideal. Yeah, everyone deserves it. Even after you're 18 yeah, that's the thing that worries me, you know, is that services after a kid turns 18? Or just, you know, it's already hard before? Yeah, once you're on adult, a grown-up, it's just and I don't know, I feel like you know, for me, I'm high functioning. I know people don't like that term. I was waiting to see Andrew's reaction. But it's so hard for kids like like, Charlie, I mean, I can't even imagine what it's gonna be like when he's grown-up. You know, he has really high support needs and like, what what do you do? There are so many different types of services that could help different people on the spectrum. It's a tough thing to yeah, to figure out so everyone can get the support they deserve.

Liz Michaels

Yes, exactly. Everybody deserves help in some way.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah. What what do you struggle with the most? What if you could choose one thing to get support? What would that be?

Liz Michaels

Probably, um, for me probably for support wise, probably probably just have that support for not just autism, but just for like anxiety as well because they also don't warn you that some people with autism and luckily with my doctor were, she's very communicative with me. She said like, she works with patients who are autistic. So I go to her and she just said like sometimes with autism, there's another I almost wish like they they warn you like along with autism and they have anxiety and depression and it's just like, for some autistics like I've read like stories, like it's like they have a whole list of issues. I'm like, Good lord. Autism is enough. Like, they don't need any more.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah

Liz Michaels

Definitely. Just like definitely, just the support I would like to have is just definitely somebody who's understanding and just doesn't like sit there and just go aha. Yeah, I mean, yeah, that's tough. I'm sorry. Somebody who like generally understands and like, really wants to reach out and help, if that makes, if that makes sense at all.

Eileen Lamb

So more like a therapist, you need someone to talk to. So that's what you need not like a

Liz Michaels

Yeah. And I actually not like a therapist, but I recently found it like a lot of like, adult autism support groups. Like I said, I found a couple on like Facebook and Instagram. And just like some of the people that have reached out, it's just amazing. Like how we have all talked and like, we're like, yeah, we understand each other. So like one, one of my goals in life has been always been to find people I can connect with. And sure enough, like, I found that it within like, like, the social media, and just like FaceTiming people even just going like, exchanging stories.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, that's nice.

Andrew M. Komarow

So yeah. So you mentioned you consider yourself a Wonder Woman. What do you think about individuals who you advocate for you say advocate for those who maybe can't speak for themselves, like Eileen's son and for autism who is not a superpower?

Liz Michaels

So how are you asking, about that?

Andrew M. Komarow

Yeah, so autism is a superpower for you, but not for others. Just tell us a little bit more about why you call yourself a Wonder Woman.

Liz Michaels

So I don't call I call myself a Wonder Woman on the spectrum, not because of the having the power, like I do. But like, especially with this pandemic, I have realized, like, you know, sometimes maybe autism might not be a gift, it can be kind of like I would say kind of stressful to have at times, especially like I said, with the pandemic like it has, it's, for me, it's literally been like the world just went like upside down. And like the again, like with my, my routine, it's kind of changed in a way, I can't really describe how it has, but somebody who doesn't consider it a superpower I completely understand. Because, for me, like being a wonder, being a Wonder Woman on the spectrum, I use, some people give me that name, because I guess it's because I take the time to understand other levels of the spectrum. And not just focus on the high end of autism. Like and like for Eileen's son, like, I completely understand like, and every aspect of autism, like needs to be talked about. And so that's what I would like to also do. And like I say that I get why people some people don't get it, look at it as a superpower. They, it can be kind of a burden at times like and they can be really frustrating at times, especially with kids, if they can't speak where they're in the middle of a meltdown, like nonverbal, kicking, punching, hitting, like, that's not a super hard. You just don't want your child like in pain, or you want your child to be comfortable. And when you see them like that, it can be really hard. So I completely understand why people don't look at it as like, oh my god its such a superpower. Because some days it's not some days, it's like, can be very tiring and very draining. So I completely understand and respect people who don't look at it as like this amazing, wonderful thing.

Eileen Lamb

That's awesome. You know, it's everything you say about how you feel this way. But it's okay. People feel differently. I mean, it's so simple. And I wish like more people thought the way you do. Like, it's okay. Yeah, you see your autism like as a superpower, for instance, as long as you understand that it's not a superpower for everybody else, you know?

Liz Michaels

Yes. And even for even for me on the hard days, like I don't sometimes like like I said, these past two years. I mean, I don't know about your children, Eileen. But for me, this pandemic has been kind of like, Whoa, what the heck's going on? Like, trying to process everything? So some days for me, me and autism don't get along very well. I look at it and go, "man, you're being a real burden, right now"? Where some people can like control handle themselves. There are others who who are on the spectrum and they're like, What in the world is going on? What is what is COVID? What is this? Like when it first started? I mean, I can't tell you the questions that were flying out of my mouth to my parents. I'm like, what is it what vaccines coming out what this what that what? And finally I just like I finally had to tell my mom like this all needs to just stop I need to. It's almost like, here's like the news.

It's like going at a fast pace. And then here's me trying to run behind it. And it's like, I'm trying to like keep up like what's going on? So I think So the past few years, I have been the past few years, there have been some really tough days where, you know, this pandemic has been extremely overwhelming and extremely to the point where I just, you know, would cry, or I would just become so angry because I'm like, What's up? I can't keep up with this. Like, what's going on?

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, I think it's been hard on a lot of people. Even those who are not autistic. But even more so for us. Yeah. What was your the subject at school that you struggled with the most? And what was your favorite? I think you said it was music.

Liz Michaels

Yes. So music was one of my favorites. In Elementary School and I just loved it. And one of my, one of my least favorite subjects, or like, the subject I struggled with was a math. Like, I really struggled with math and like it, like eat, especially when I got up to middle and high school. I was like, I don't know what you're talking about. Like you could be. And then they're like, well, we just went over it. I'm like, you and I would look at my teacher and go, you can, you can go over it 500 times, I'm still not gonna understand. Another, but another favorite subject that I really enjoyed was Language Arts as well. Um, and what was funny, what's funny about Language Arts is I did struggle at first like in elementary and middle, like, I don't know if I'm, so I would like read something. But not understand what I read. I could read it perfectly like the "Cat in the Hat". But when the teacher would be like, so what was that about? I could not comprehend. And that was and going. But going back to the, how could you tell you're different? That that was one of the things as well not comprehending what I read or what was spoken to me.

Andrew M. Komarow

Yeah, yeah. Um, so I grew up Jewish. And were taught to read Hebrew, before speaking Hebrew. So I could actually read Hebrew. I had, no idea what I was saying the vast majority of the time, I had no idea what it meant. So that's the analogy that kind of came to me in my head. I could read Hebrew, I could say things, but I don't know what I'm saying. Or yeah, that's interesting.

Liz Michaels

Yes, it's so funny. Like I, I was actually moved up to the higher in second grade, I was moved up to the higher reading level, because I could read, but when they figured out like, I could not understand what I read. They were like, oh, let's move her back down, like, and I mean, elementary and middle, like, I could read it 100, hundreds, hundreds of times. And I'd be like, I still don't know what I've read. So just that the memorizing stuff, and just now high school, as soon as I got to high school, like 10th 11th grade, that's when it clicked. And I was like, Okay, I got this, like I am now being an adult, I can remember exactly what I read.

Eileen Lamb

That's good. Yeah, I you know, it's funny, because I was the same way I was really good at reading. And I didn't always understand what I was reading. I mean, I didn't understand most of the time, or like some things because like, I today, I took them literally, it changed the meaning of the story, which made it harder to understand the next thing. Like it's not like a spiral effect. And I see that in my youngest son, who's learning to read right now. It's like, he can remember the words and read them, but he doesn't understand. But you know, he's

Liz Michaels

And that's frustrating. Like, for me, especially, like, I was a really good reader, I could read out loud, I used to love reading out loud, but what looking back on what they and what makes me kind of sad and being like a kid. Like, and I remember sitting there being like, I don't, I don't know what I just read, like, I read it, but I I don't know what I read like, and like the teacher would be like so. So they they called me Elizabeth in school, I finally just went by Liz as I got older, but in school elementary school, they're like "So Elizabeth, what did you just read to us?" I would be like, I don't know, like, and I and some of them would get frustrated. They'd be like, you just read it. And I'm like, I don't know. But, um, but reading. Reading, though, was reading comprehension is what I should say was one of those really, really Struggles. Reading itself that wasn't reading aloud wasn't but me comprehending what I read was a real struggle and that math.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah. Okay, we're going to ask you some quickfire questions.

Liz Michaels

Okay

Eileen Lamb

Which means that I ask your questions and you tell me the first thing that comes to your mind.

Liz Michaels

Okay.

Eileen Lamb

Okay, are you ready?

Liz Michaels

Yep, ready.

Eileen Lamb

What is the best piece piece of advice you've ever been given?

Liz Michaels

Always believe in yourself.

Eileen Lamb

I love it. What do you like to do to relax?

Liz Michaels

Take a hot bath.

Eileen Lamb

What is your favorite food?

Liz Michaels

Eggplant Parmesan.

Eileen Lamb

Okay. (all laugh)

Liz Michaels

Yes.

Eileen Lamb

What's your favorite movie? Or TV show?

Liz Michaels

My favorite TV show? Probably. Oh gosh, this is a hard one. Probably "Hell's Kitchen".

Eileen Lamb

I love that show.

Liz Michaels

I love Gordon Ramsay.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, he's great. So, anyway, what's your favorite book, that's also a movie.

Liz Michaels

A favorite book, that's also a movie. Well, it does this count. It's about to be made. And it's, it's just been made into a movie. But my favorite book is "Where the Crawdads Sing."

Eileen Lamb

I've never read it. And I didn't know it was gonna be a movie.

Liz Michaels

Yes. So but um, one recently that I just watched and I did read was "Still Alice". And that was about a young woman who ended up being a being one of the youngest women to be diagnosed with all early onset Alzheimer's.

Eileen Lamb

How old was she?

Liz Michaels

In the movie, she was 50. But in real life, the woman was about like, 45. She's one of the youngest people to be diagnosed with early onset. It's yeah, it was. It was a sad movie, but it was kind of, for me, it was pretty powerful to learn to learn about something like that. And her seen her journey.

Eileen Lamb

Right. Yeah, that sounds really interesting. I want to watch it. Now.

Liz Michaels

Yeah.

Andrew M. Komarow

You havn't even seen Star Wars but you are gonna watch that? (all laugh)

Eileen Lamb

Yeah.

Andrew M. Komarow

Eileen, you need help. (all laugh)

Eileen Lamb

I do we need more support as autistic adults see?

Liz Michaels

Yes, yes.

Eileen Lamb

Well Liz, thank you. Oh, wait. I mean, thank you so much for joining us. I stand by that. But do you want to tell people where to find you online? On social media?

Liz Michaels

Yes. So Instagram. I am Liz55890712. I'm also Liz Michaels. Liz and michells on Facebook. And also I you know, again, you're welcome to message me and become my friend. You are always welcome at my table of life.

Eileen Lamb

Oh, that's beautiful.

Liz Michaels

Yes, of course. Yes. Especially you and Andrew. Eileen, you guys are more than always welcome at my table.

Eileen Lamb

Thank you.

Andrew M. Komarow

Well, thank you for helping spread kindness around. It's definitely needed.

Liz Michaels

Yeah, that's anytime of course.

Eileen Lamb

Awesome. Well, you have a good one.

Andrew M. Komarow

Thank you.

Liz Michaels

Yes. Thank you so much. Thank you. Bye.