

Adulthood on the Spectrum: Stand-up comedy, sarcasm, and history

Andrew M. Komarow

Welcome to "Adulthood on the Spectrum," I am Andrew, an autistic certified financial planner. I co-run "Adulthood on the Spectrum," with Eileen Lamb. Hey, Eileen.

Eileen Lamb

Hey everyone. In this podcast, we want to highlight the real voices of autistic adults, not just inspirational stories, but people like us talking about their day to day life. Basically, we want to give a voice to a variety of autistic people.

Andrew M. Komarow

And today, our guest is Nell Russ. Nell is an autistic comedian, and a self-professed nerd, and probably given us the shortest bio we've ever asked for, which is really impressive for a podcast that only has autistic guests, asking for a bio.

Eileen Lamb

Hey, thanks for joining us today.

Nell Russ

Yeah. Cool.

Eileen Lamb

So what's the what's your preferred identity language when it comes to autism? Person with autism? Autistic? On the spectrum? And what are your preferred pronouns?

Nell Russ

On the spectrum. And she/her.

Eileen Lamb

Well, I think you're the first one to give us that answer. On the spectrum, I like it too.

Andrew M. Komarow

Really?

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, I mean, a lot of people say, I don't care or autistic or person with autism, but on the spectrum. I think it is the first, we'll have to check now.

Andrew M. Komarow

Yes, we will. I didn't mean that we have somebody who has fact checked all our episodes, we should email our resident fact checker, probably. Yes. Okay. So can you tell us about when you were diagnosed with autism and what that experience was like assuming you were old enough to remember.

Nell Russ

So the whole process actually began when I was really little, as soon as I started preschool, my parents were, they got reports from the teachers that I wouldn't want to interact with other kids avoided crowds, like they would read a story to the class, but I would have my back turned, and just a whole lot of anxiety and kindergarten, and, you know, got medicated for that. But I didn't know that it was on the spectrum until I was in high school. It was, um, that was my junior year. And I was on the bowling team. And one of the other people on the team had Asperger's. And she was like, can I ask you a personal question? And I said, Yeah, sure. And she was like, Do you have Asperger's? Because I do. And that kind of got me into the whole head hunting and searching thing. And the whole reading up on it, and I finally got diagnosed when I was 16.

Eileen Lamb

Did you or do you have any other diagnosis other than autism? And why do you feel that autism is the correct diagnosis?

Nell Russ

So the other stuff I have going on is anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder, and major depression and bipolar two disorder. And I, I figured autism was the correct one. Because, you know, because I had been, like, picked on all through school is like, you know, originally, it wasn't the autism that picked me with it was just sort of more of a deal. Like, you know, she's definitely struggling in ways that other kids aren't. But I didn't fit back then early in elementary school into the very classic definition of autism at the time, that was 2000 to 2001. And I was just beginning elementary school, they were still looking for what presented like, level three autism, like the delayed speech and the repetitive behaviors and the using people as objects and all that and didn't really take into consideration at that point in time. The that, that high functioning could exist, you're like, well, she's really complicated, because she doesn't fit into any of these boxes, but stuff is definitely weird. So

Eileen Lamb

So your official diagnosis was Asperger's? Do you still use the term? How do you feel?

Nell Russ

Yeah, I feel it's, I feel it's still important to use the term because I think it adds a greater differentiation for what we need for diagnostic categories. Because, you know, just the other stuff just doesn't fit. Like the other categories. Like because yeah, to think of autism still think of a little more impaired. And Asperger's not as much so still, obviously a disability but not quite as much.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, I wish I hadn't, you know, removed Asperger's. And then it was still a separate diagnosis. Because, like when I say I have autism, like compared to my eldest son who's like, nonverbal intellectually disabled, it's like, I mean, weird that it's the same diagnosis, you know, so I still say Asperger's for myself.

Nell Russ

Yeah, because it's like how do we even share the same spectrum if one needs one has needs that are this severe and the other doesn't. It's just weird.

Andrew M. Komarow

Yeah. Now, you are a comedian.

Nell Russ

Yeah. I am stand-up.

Andrew M. Komarow

And so which, and again, I like to think that, you know, the more, you know, trauma somebody has in their past, the darker their humor and the funny, funnier they are. So how funny are you and what got you into comedy?

Nell Russ

I think I'm quite funny, actually. And it originally started because when I was in high school, and finally making some friends for the first time, like, I wasn't even really trying, I would just make blunt observations about stuff. And people somehow thought they were hilarious. And I'm like, I wasn't even trying to make a joke. And they just thought that I was. And I remember one of my friends said, "You should do stand-up comedy". And then I kind of bRushed it off at the time. But then in the summer of 2017, then I started it for the first time it was at. it was at the church that my parents went to. it was at the church talent show, and I didn't know what I was doing. So yeah, but people liked it enough. And I'm like, I want to continue this. And so I did.

Eileen Lamb

How often do you do you do it? You do, how do they call those open mic nights?

Nell Russ

And so yeah, plenty, plenty of open mics. And yeah, starting to do a lot more shows. This is my fourth year of comedy. So yeah. No, I like it. Love it.

Eileen Lamb

It's pretty much awesome. Can you give us a few jokes, you know, this is "Adulting on the Spectrum", so you can curse, say whatever you want.

Nell Russ

So one of my early jokes is, if there was a support group for atheists, I wouldn't believe it.

Eileen Lamb

That's good. How do people react to that one?

Nell Russ

Oh people love that. Yeah. I joke a lot about autism, actually. And so my intro joke for that bit of my set is I was autistic as a kid. Still am. And then yeah, there's a whole lot. There's a whole lot there.

Andrew M. Komarow

So again, when you think about like, social anxiety, right, like, I feel like, a lot of ways, I can't think of something almost more anxious than, like, you know, standing up comedy, where you're trying to get people to get out, laugh at you. Right. And, you know, I can just imagine that being just very difficult. But at the same time, I've noticed that myself and a lot of other people, when they're talking about, again, their special interest or doing something that they truly enjoy, you know, if they're really, you know, social situations are a lot better, right? Or it's like, yeah, I mean, again, at just start asking Eileen about tennis balls right. Now, but it sure but like, you know, a lot of talking about, you know, what interests them. So is that our stand up comedy is, you know, for you? Because on the surface, it seems like very counterintuitive. You know?

Nell Russ

So basically what goes on with me is I don't have the classic social anxiety, not the diagnosis, it's like, I almost have it in reverse, like talking up close and personal with people is difficult. But when I'm on stage, you know, I control what jokes I want to tell and I set the pace and it's not the world setting the pace for me and messing me up and whatever. The just be able to just have that. And I can take the audience on a ride like, oh, you take it this way. No, actually, we're going over here now. And I just like, I don't know, I guess I just like having that power. And I've always liked performing anyway, it's always just felt better than real life a lot of the time.

Eileen Lamb

So is it a, like, you like being in control? Because I know like, for me, I have a general anxiety disorder too. And like when things get out of my control, that's when I start like the anxiety just completely like overwhelms me so I can understand what you said, I still couldn't do what you're doing. But it makes sense because you're in control. Like you said, you're the one running the show, right?

Nell Russ

Yeah, and also the way that comedy works for me is that it's pretty it's unpredictable but in a very predictable kind of way like you understand like there could be a wide variety of reactions here. And some jokes might land others might not. Odd situations, odd happenings happen at like mics and shows like if there are like comics who are like kind of like weird and creepy or like they're just like bigots. Like you never know when that's going to happen either. And so, yeah, in contrast to like any number of happenings in the outside world, which you have no idea what could come your way. It's

just like yeah, like you can genuine genuinely tell when you you can generally tell, like a whole array of things that could happen in comedy. So yeah.

Eileen Lamb

What misconceptions do you find in regards to autism and humor?

Nell Russ

Um, well, there's that whole thing that autistic people don't get jokes. They don't have a sense of humor. And it's like, no, we do, but it's not always going to be the kind of humor that typical people enjoy. Like me, I love puns, I love that sort of language, humor, and humor that's a bit darker and like, not a lot of people kind of enjoy that comedy. The kind of comedy that most people like to digest is that long narrative story, comedy, observational comedy, and I could never do observational comedy. I don't know what people do. And so I just can't. And so yeah, just that, that wordy humor is? Yeah, it's my bread and butter. I love it.

Andrew M. Komarow

So again, you know, so being a performer getting on stage, you know, again, attempting to start your own business, based upon getting people to like you, when phrase like that it sounds like the complete opposite of what any autistic person would you know be good at. You told us a little bit like how you excel at it, Or, you know, but what was it? You know, was it hard to get started? Are you doing it? You know, I got a bit more hobby and sounds like you're starting to get they get paid? You know, somewhat? Yeah, of course, you're just like starting your because you did you started your own business, right?

Nell Russ

Oh, I would say both Yes. And no, because to truly have a brand and make a regular living in comedy, you have to do it for a lot longer. So it's still not at the point. And I don't think it will be for some years yet where I could actually support myself. I want to get there one day, but I can't right now. And so right now, it's just a little, tiny little side job that I can just get to, but I do eventually want it to become a huge thing.

Eileen Lamb

You know, Andrew and I are really extremely sarcastic. And why do you think some people with autism are like us and other can't pick up on sarcasm at all?

Nell Russ

Well, sometimes it's really difficult because some people will exaggerate their sarcasm, but some others it'll sound pretty seamless, like though, like they're just talking about something. And it's like, yeah, sometimes it slips under the radar. But some other people it's like, no, they're sarcastic, because, okay, they're exaggerating it to a point. That's funny, but some other people don't. And so that's when it gets confusing.

Andrew M. Komarow

I think Eileen, and I would each fall in that confusing category. But we know each other well enough for it. We just assume I think would you say that's fair, Eileen?

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, that's that's fairest.

Andrew M. Komarow

Or sometimes we will like wait, are you being sarcastic or not? Like we, we assume each other is? I think sometimes, you you know, we're like, oh, no, wait, you're serious. You really are drowning, you really needed me to save you. Sorry, too late.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah. That was that, that cliché about autistic people and autism is really funny to me, because I feel like, I am way more sarcastic than the average person and like, you know, you read about how autistic people like, they can do sarcasm and like, feel like it's my language. You know, it's....

Andrew M. Komarow

Did you grow up up in a sarcastic household, Eileen? My father was so sarcastic like it's just like, like you said, my language like it's just how we spoke.

Eileen Lamb

Same so I think that's probably something that's learned with like, growing up in a household. Oh, yeah. I never said about it. But yeah, yeah. How about you, Nell?

Nell Russ

I kind of have to get like, either really annoyed, or, like in a mega goofy mood to be sarcastic. And even then it's like, like everybody like knows I am. And so it's just like, kind of like, overly excessively bitey sometimes, and no, that doesn't go over well with a lot of people, but sometimes just, but sometimes it does, and sometimes get a laugh out of that. So that's cool.

Andrew M. Komarow

So any tips that you would give to other autistic individuals who want to like pursue their passions, their dreams, they're told they can, you know, what advice would you give to anyone? Because again, you're you seem to be doing that?

Nell Russ

Yeah, I think it would really depend on the person and it would depend on the specific type of interest. Stand-up is a little harder to sell because it's really rare to be really good at it. Most people are going to, you know, fall on their faces the whole time they try it and get really discouraged. And so if you're able to put with a lot of just falling down and falling down and failing, then yeah, I'd say honestly go for

whatever I guess don't really get too attached to whatever expectation you have just like keep it open, that sort of thing.

Eileen Lamb

What hatred, if any of you experienced especially talking about your autism at a comedy show, insults are almost expected. How do you deal with them? If that's happened to you?

Nell Russ

That's actually never really happened. That doesn't mean that it couldn't but it but it hasn't. I, I was in the comedy contests a few days ago. And you know, a lot of times a comedy shows people heckle so I started my autistic as a kid bit, someone in the audience just goes "awh", and I wasn't sure if they were trying to like joke along, so I just shouted, "pity me", and then that got a pretty solid crowd reaction.

Eileen Lamb

That's good. How about online? Are you active online? Do you get any hate there?

Nell Russ

No, not really. I'm not important enough for it. I guess.

Eileen Lamb

Not yet.

Nell Russ

Not yet. But yeah, I could eventually,

Andrew M. Komarow

Eileen often gets, if you want to be hated by almost everyone on the internet. She's a pro. Yes.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, just ABA therapy. And you're

Nell Russ

Like, hey, this kind of sucks for me. Sometimes. You're ableist Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Yeah, no, it's yeah, the internet's disgusting. It's a hoax.

Andrew M. Komarow

So one thing that really interested me is you say you have a heavy metal interest. And I'm not talking about like the poisonous ones from TSI. It music Yeah. So but in you also have again, a noise sensitivity. Right? Yeah. So yeah.

Nell Russ

So basically, I don't like loud noises that are uncontrolled, and that I have no control over. And it depends on the kind of sound to like, if it's like, something so niche and sharp, that makes me jump that's usually not cool. Or the loud continuous noises that like festivals or stuff, or, yeah, if it's not within my control, I'm not a fan. But if but if I am, and when I can turn down or turn up the volume whenever I want, then then that's always fun. And also, a lot of folks who make heavy metal, the big bands are also just good musicians, and they know what they're doing. And they know how to play with sound and place it so I, I do love that very much so.

Eileen Lamb

You have a love for history, too. Is that right?

Nell Russ

Definitely, I wish

Eileen Lamb

You wish other people did too?

Nell Russ

Yeah. Just like they don't want to talk about the bubonic plague. And I'm just like, why?

Eileen Lamb

You know, in France, I feel like we have, I am from France in case you haven't noticed. We have more interest in history. I don't know if it's because the country has more history itself. Maybe. But even it's cool. It's pushed like, a lot. I mean, more than then here. Like, well, we learn about like wars I mean. But all the wars, obviously. Because, yeah, like World War I and World War II but also like, the kings and all of that. I mean, we have like, you know, our story. Yes. Way back in. Yeah.

Nell Russ

Yeah. So, like, I don't know how the education system is in France. But if it's better, and they teach history better, that might also help for people to learn to like history, because, yeah, in America, history is just a lot of teachers just droning on about facts and dates, and not really illustrating the level and the relevance to any of it. And if you're already interested in history, it's no big deal. But if you're not, it's really hard to get into history when it's just like, memorize this, this this this.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, well, I think it really depends on the teacher you get, but we do a lot of that, you know, date what happened on that date, and I had a really good memory so like, I would get good grades. I wouldn't like really enjoy what I was learning and I think I it took me years to get into history until I got a good teacher. So like, I think you're right, it really depends on where it starts. Is it true that you are especially interested in the medieval times?

Nell Russ

Oh, yeah. Medieval times are very interesting. One of my favorite books that I actually have on it, it's like a travel guide slash history book. It's called "Time Travelers Guide to Medieval England". And it's like, fully immersive, like, as you're like, walking, like through the time, like the stuff you'll see like in the period and just really fascinating facts. And so that's a lot of fun.

Eileen Lamb

How'd you think autism was looked at? Back then? Like, how? How was it for like someone like, you know, maybe my eldest son, Charlie, who is nonverbal and severe and how about people like us?

Nell Russ

Um, well, well, yeah, usually like those folks and just be cared for. But if the behavior was really erratic, like, No, I was this person Bewitched, like, did they need an exorcism or something? Definitely. So yeah, probably, it would be hard. It would be really hard.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, I mean, even just a few years ago, and like 2020 was already not well understood. So yeah, that makes sense. Well, I think, Andrew, do you have any other question? I think that was that was it?

Andrew M. Komarow

No, I think that's good.

Eileen Lamb

What we're gonna do something that's, it's called quickfire questions. So I'm going to ask you some questions. And you tell me like, you know, no overthinking first thing that comes to your mind. You ready?

Nell Russ

Go for it.

Eileen Lamb

Do you have a favorite quote? And if so what is it?

Nell Russ

It would be "If you can't make yourself laugh, make others laugh. Pretty soon, you'll be laughing along with them."

Eileen Lamb

Favorite comedy movie?

Nell Russ

I don't know if I have a favorite comedy movie. But I would have to say one of the specials I like the most is by this comedian, also another autistic comedian, Hannah Gatsby. And so she also does like a

whole lot of word humor. And in her 2019 special called "Douglas", she has this whole part, she's really interested in art history. So in the second half of her show, just poking fun at like different like classical paintings, and like the really funny stuff in there. And so that was something I've never seen in a special before. So that was really neat.

Eileen Lamb

It's kind of like your two special interests together, right?

Nell Russ

Yeah. together and that was done really well. She's excellent comedian.

Eileen Lamb

What is your favorite drink---alcoholic or not?

Nell Russ

Um, I'd have to say non-alcoholic, say Cherry Coke. Alcoholic? As for alcoholic, I would say screwdrivers.

Eileen Lamb

What is that?

Nell Russ

It's orange juice and vodka together.

Eileen Lamb

I've never heard that term.

Nell Russ

It's really good.

Eileen Lamb

Who's your favorite comedian? I think you might have answered that.

Nell Russ

That was the best special I've ever seen. But my favorite comedian, it's tie between Mitch Hedberg, and Steven Wright also very wordy comedians, so.

Eileen Lamb

What was your dream job as a child?

Nell Russ

Ah. The only thing that I can distinctly remember, I had a phase for a time. I was like, when I was like, from ages like seven to nine, I was really interested in this show called Animal Cops. And these just be a bunch of animal rescue officers who would rescue animals from the most deplorable conditions ever. And I was fascinated by it. And I was like, hey, I want to be that when I grow up, I want to like rescue animals from living hell and just help them and all that. But other than that, I don't remember like, I want to, to this, it's always felt like a one of those chunky questions that's hard to like, realize when you're younger and already, like not in sync with the world, like what do you want to be when you grow up. I don't know what's there.

Eileen Lamb

You're not really on social media. But is there any where people can find you?

Nell Russ

To tell you the truth, I'm on social media every day, but it's mostly just liking stuff on Facebook and commenting on a few things. But where you can find me where you can find my comedy is on Facebook, just type in Nell Russ Comedy in the search bar. And they'll bring you to my comedy page. And I'm also on Instagram, and my user handle is lowercase nell and then underscore and then razor.

Eileen Lamb

Cool. Yeah, well, we'll leave links in the description so people can find you. Cool. Thank you for talking with us today. That was That was awesome. I like that you do comedy as an autistic adult because it kind of breaks that you know misconception, cliché about it. So yeah, awesome.

Andrew M. Komarow

Thanks so much, thanks for coming.