

Mental health and wellbeing in autistic youth and young adults during transitions

CASE STUDY

Jesse is 19 years old and from rural Victoria. She is currently in her first year at University and living in a share house with other students. Her father, mother and older brother Josh (21) still live in the family home.

From the age of 13 Jesse was a very anxious teen and often had low moods. She was diagnosed with anxiety and depression at age 14 by the family GP. Despite receiving treatment for her anxiety and depression Jesse continued to feel something wasn't quite right. At 15, she went to her GP and discussed her feelings, the GP referred her to a clinical psychologist who diagnosed her as Autistic.

Jesse's only interaction with neurodivergent people was at school, seeing them bullied for being different. This made her very nervous to disclose her new diagnosis to her friends and teachers. Jesse continued regular sessions with her psychologist to assist with the new Autism diagnosis in addition to her other mental health diagnoses.

Since the Autism diagnosis Jesse struggled with her schooling and needed continued support from her GP, psychologist and teachers (who she had eventually told about her diagnosis). In years 11 and 12 she often had to ask for special consideration to meet deadlines. At the end of year 11 Jesse also became close to a boy at school (Dean, who was in year 12) and by the time she started year 12 they had declared their relationship as official.

Dean was accepted into Engineering at a University two hours away from their home town, so they can only spend time together on weekends. Jesse doesn't use public transport during peak times, so often relied on Dean to come to her. At times they didn't see each other for 2-3 weeks due to conflicting schedules. This was difficult for Jesse and she started to describe their relationship as "long distance".

Despite these distractions, and a lot of late nights, Jesse kept up with her schoolwork and received an offer for a place in a Bachelor of Education at University. Jesse isn't sure what she wants to do with this degree yet, but she knows she wants to help people to learn. She's also very proud to be the first person in her family to go to university.

Originally, she started her course online so she could stay at home with her family, however she found she struggled with online learning, so decided to move closer to the campus. Having been living in a share house with other students for six months, she feels things are going reasonably well, though with quite a lot of support from a psychologist and mentor at the University.

Before she moved, she spent a lot of time in the shed with her dad making metal art. When Jesse has felt anxious and depressed, this was a therapeutic way for Jesse and her dad to connect and for Jesse to manage her mental health.

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Jesse is trying to make new friends as she feels Dean is her only friend. She sees on social media that her high school friends have new Uni friends and have achieved milestones she has yet to accomplish (such as driving).

Jesse wants to make friends through University; but expresses feeling too nervous to join in with the new first-year events or navigate group situations. She has met one person who she sits with for a few tutorials; however she can't remember their name and feels it's too late to ask. They typically exchange a smile and politely partner up for study discussions before parting ways.

Jesse often finishes Uni work at the last minute, staying up all night to complete assignments. Jesse finds it difficult to ask for help with her assignments and has submitted a few late in her second semester. Jesse's lecturers have been very understanding; however she has been using illness and emergencies as reasons, rather than disclosing the impact of her disability. She wonders how much longer she can use these types of excuses.

Jesse has a casual job at a local department store in a busy shopping centre, which gives her some money in addition to her AusStudy allowance. She doesn't get many shifts and often has to borrow money from her dad and lives week-to-week. Jesse enjoys working in the electronics section, as she has a wide knowledge of the items. She's often asked to fill-in other roles, including the check outs, which she finds very stressful. Jesse often struggles during peak periods like Christmas and Easter. She'll typically call in sick every month or two; sometimes more often during these peak periods. Jesse is concerned to bring anything up with her

employer as she doesn't want to bring attention to her performance, in case she loses shifts or even her job. At Easter, Jesse became incredibly heightened after having to leave a shift because she felt dizzy and experienced a migraine. She even had to call in sick the next day as well.

When not at work or Uni she spends her spare time playing computer games alone in her rented room with the lights off. Jesse has found it hard to connect with her house mates who like to party, and has overheard a roommate describe her as a 'loner'. Jesse is also finding it hard to navigate daily-living tasks now she is sharing with strangers. Dishes are stacking up in her room, a laundry pile growing in the corner and she eats mostly "ready-to eat-meals".

Jesse shared with her psychologist recently that she has only been eating one small meal per day for the last month after impulse purchasing a VR headset on Afterpay, but doesn't find this worrying as she "usually doesn't eat much anyway". Her psychologist notices that Jesse is rapidly losing weight.

As she approaches the end to her second semester the pressures of study, work, making new friends, and missing home have mounted and Jesse is becoming increasingly overwhelmed by work expectations, study deadlines, socialising and daily life. Jesse is experiencing suicidal ideation and extreme anxiety on a daily basis and wonders if her Autism diagnosis might be impacting all parts of her life – her work, study and social life.

Jesse wants to learn to cope better and decides to share how she's really feeling with her psychologist at her next session.