Letter

Hi.

What a way to start a letter right? It's you, yes you, being me. I'm here writing this right now to let you know that you're *not* crazy, a failure, or lazy. Oh, how I wish I could go back in time to give you a hug, to reassure you that "you're *not* the problem and it's not your fault." To tell you it's ok to *feel*, and it'll get better - you'll understand *why* later.

All these feelings of being on the edge of a cliff and with just one more push, you'd hopefully fall, and the noise would stop. It'd be nice, wouldn't it?

The drifting gazes that make you wish time had stopped, rather than having skipped years of your life just from your fleeting glance. A single blink, and the whole day has vanished. Wishing your mind didn't wander into another world of its own.

I wonder if someone had told me earlier that these labels of being "overly emotional" wasn't a personality flaw, but a chemical imbalance. How would that make *you* feel? I'll tell you how it made *me* feel.

Nothing.

It's hard to admit; I was *meant* to feel some relief, I was *meant* to feel happy. I thought I would; it's what you're *meant* to feel. Right? You'd think I'd feel relief, like a void inside me that was *meant* to feel whole again. But no, it was almost like apathy. After waiting so long to hear those words of validation, why didn't I *feel* anything?

I plastered on a smile when asked how I felt, "relieved," I said. (I lied). What was it I was feeling? What was *meant* to be a whirlwind of emotions, turned out to be… empty? Waves of emotions overflowed my head, like a tap that I couldn't turn off.

Why?

Why now? *Why* did no one notice? *Why* did *I* have to suffer the consequences for so long without even realising?

Why?

Why?

Why?

How was my inattentiveness in class seen as a lack of motivation? What did this mean for me? What did this mean for who *I* was, or am? Was *I* not the problem? Why was *I* told to change, to fit in with what was acceptable? How was *I* put in a system that wasn't built for me, yet I had to learn to assimilate to something that *I* didn't fit in with? But I'm here? How? *Who* made it here?

The *me* who felt like I was clawing myself out of a ditch every day that only got deeper and deeper, *just* to keep up with everyone else. The *me* who felt like she was trapped in a glass jar, screaming, hoping no one would hear her; because if they did, the façade would shatter. The *me* who came home every night exhausted, unbeknownst to *why*? Or the *you* who believes this is the consequence of obtaining what you're *meant* to? Are *you* a product carefully curated through the hands of what others told *you* to be? Am *I* truly *me*? How did that glass jar *not* break?

I went through the stages of grief after being diagnosed, weird right? Who was I mourning, *you* or *me*?

How was my lack of understanding and processing verbal instructions never picked up, but I was only told that I "wasn't paying attention"? Creating this constant negative loop of feelings, telling myself "I'm a failure," all for not being able to do something so "simple." How I was born with the same pieces of a puzzle as everyone else, but mine seemed to be missing pieces.

What I was told to believe were character flaws but were something I had no control over. The connotations of "lazy" constantly replaying in my head, something that is branded to what I ultimately *am*. That feeling of *thinking* about and *wanting* to do something, but there's something weighing you down, leaving you stuck in a constant time freeze.

It's not your fault. It's not *our* fault.

Being blamed for things I had no control over. I wish I could tell you. But it's not time yet. It'll constantly feel like people are trying to tell you to complete a puzzle with pieces that are missing; but you'll find them.

The *idea* of creating drive from nothing, how you're *meant* to be motivated, how you're *meant* to do well in school, how you're *meant* to be able to pay attention. All these things, I'm *meant* to do, but I *couldn't. You* can't.

Getting the overwhelming sense to hibernate; to just close your eyes and never open them, as if you were being swallowed whole, never to be seen again. Shutting off all the noise and chatter that is the broken radio in your head. The taxing mental energy it takes to keep up the appearances during the day.

Have you ever wondered *why*?

Feeling broken, and unable to catch up with everyone. How it feels like you're running a marathon, but no one else is. Do you remember *why* or *when* you started to try and "fit in"? This overwhelming sense of dread; how I trained myself to fit in - before I even know why, or when I started doing it.

I *cannot* tell you how much of a rollercoaster it's been since getting diagnosed. It feels like I can finally finish that puzzle. Everything *finally* makes sense, clarity I never knew I wished for. How the one history teacher told us off during class – for nothing. How after that, every time I sat in his class it'd be like going into a never-ending black hole of ruminating

thoughts. Never uttering a single word, frozen in fear. How I'd escape to this black hole to mull over my thoughts and spiral within my emotions. How this black hole would also play a constant loop of him giving me dirty looks, falling deeper, and repeating the cycle. But the question was still – *why*?

I'll never forget the look of shock I saw when I told one of my friends. The audible gasp, mouth ajar, and the look that said it all. Asking *why* I need to, when I'm perfectly *fine*; *why* do I need to "fix" something that's not broken. But was I fine? Or had I been overcompensating and overworking myself to get to where I am now? Or am I trying to level the playing field when I was already so far behind everyone else? After finding what I thought was acceptance, other thoughts came in.

I'm not trying to "fix" anything. I want to finally silence the constant noise in my head. The symphony that's not orchestrated by me but was told I am the composer to. The constant rumination of negative emotions, chatter, the lack of identity, and feeling like an imposter. The creeping thoughts of second guessing something I had already decided. Even though it was something *I* chose, something that I knew *I* wanted. To help *me*. Not to be "normal," but to quieten the noise once and for all.

Prescribing my own agency.

My journey, and *my* path to rediscovery. Something *I* know that is best for me.

This is *your* journey.

You'll be in control; *you'll* be the conductor to a symphony *you* know. To a score we've named *Ode to Me: Learning to Accept the Bittersweet Sound*.

Reflective piece

This reflection aims to talk about the impact on one's identity from having a late diagnosis. There are multiple external and internal factors contributing to this. The process of relearning and reevaluating what you define your identity as can be viewed from many perspectives. The disciplines discussed will be from psychological, sociological, educational and philosophical perspectives; viewing how they interact and contribute with each other when forming identity.

Writing a letter to my past self felt the most appropriate when expressing the journey to rediscovering my identity. I had recently purchased a book called *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Vuong, 2019), which changed how I approached my medium. His skilled use of language influenced me to include autofiction features, creating a letter-autofiction fusion. Using a direct approach to reflect my process in reevaluating my identity and utilising the change of first-person pronouns within the piece, helped in differentiating between the past and present identity. Being diagnosed with ADHD later in life has made me reevaluate what identity means to me and how it has been formed throughout my life. It helped me to reinterpret my identity from different perspectives.

Writing a letter was to reassure my past and present self. Showcasing that something so integral to one's identity can be left unknown and not discovered until much later. Being diagnosed late with something so essential can negatively impact formatting identity (Mansfield & Soni, 2024). However, it can also positively impact them by leading them to clarity (Stenner et al., 2019) and redefining their social standing. Through this SDA I hope to reassure others who have also struggled in changing the perspective of their identity.

My medium, it tends to jump from one place to another, reflective on how the processing in my brain works. Including the overthinking, rejection sensitivity dysphoria

mentioned, as well as the masking, emotional dysregulation, burnout and internalised stigma. Letting her know that the way she feels and works to process things is not because she lacks anything.

The societal and systematic issues surrounding ADHD has led to a heavy stigma surrounding it, and many who don't believe in the diagnosis (Mills, 2022). When combined with people who have been diagnosed later, and the internal problems they may face, it can lead to internal stigma festering. Having deep-rooted beliefs placed through what has been taught, concocting a negative perspective on what their new diagnosis means for their identity. Facing new labels attached to them, as well as the internal fear of rejection of others of how they'll now be perceived and decreasing expectations (Shifrer, 2013). Though some may not think this way, what has been taught through the education system and society, contributes heavily to what we think are our original thoughts (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015).

Had I been diagnosed earlier; I may not have been able to re-adjust my thinking on my identity. I might not have had the same autonomy to make my own decisions surrounding the implications of ADHD, such as exploring medically and choosing if people knew of my diagnosis. Having the right to choose, adds to what I see as identity, however, it is not something I reveal to everyone. This is due to the stigma surrounding it and my own unrealised stigma.

ADHD has many negative labels and conversations surrounding it, especially medication and its misuse (Loe, 2008). Choosing to medicate to reduce ADHD symptoms can be seen as a way of choosing your identity; but it can still lead to questioning which is the authentic and real version (Loe & Cuttino, 2008). However, this is a product of what society says, what they've been taught and what they think, feeding into a negative loop into what people may think. Those who got diagnosed later, may not wish to be attached to these

contributing. Consequently, leading to a reluctance in accepting their diagnosis or revealing it and internalising their negative emotions.

Through people's views around the idea that medication helps to fix ADHD, is a wrong label for it to be associated with. Many even view it as an academic enhancer; however, there is little evidence to suggest so. This is because many see it work efficiently for those with ADHD (Chong et al., 2023), making them assume it would work the same for those without (Outram, 2010). This leads to those without a prescription to feed into this inflated belief and the negativity surrounding ADHD medication. There is not much scientific evidence to support such rumours; as this information recycling continues, it leads to a creation of a continuous negative stigma cycle. Reinforcing the labels of those who choose to take medication are taking the easy way out and to "fix" themselves to become "normal." However, it's to rebalance their dopamine and norepinephrine levels (Outram, 2010).

Medicating younger people who have ADHD also comes into question; usually the parents decide and it's not their choice. Being diagnosed at a young age can lead to not understanding identity and where you stand socially and among peers (Wiener, 2023), young people will also automatically attach labels. Teachers would also be informed, which can heavily impact their experience at school (Metzger, 2021). Whether positively or negatively, the relationship between a student and teacher is essential in their academic outcome (Dangmann et al., 2024; Evaldsson & Svahn, 2019; Ewe, 2019; Hjörne & Evaldsson, 2014). Consequently, effecting how an individual identifies, performs and socialises. Young children generally are unaware what their diagnosis is; but view it as a bad thing from the way they have seen their teachers and parents talk about it, and so, view it as a negative flaw that they have (Kristensen & Mørck, 2016). Directly showing how surrounding adult relationships can heavily impact a young child's view on their identity and the uncertainty of it. Even with scientific knowledge on the diagnosis, which parents and teachers will be

informed of, the education system and society still play a part in how we view our identity, and existentially question who we are.

Although you're told to feel a certain way in particular situations, the emotions when receiving my diagnosis were not expected. Processing and having to reevaluate past events reshaped what I thought (Fleischmann & Miller, 2013); the inability to recognise and understand my emotions at the time were reflective in the alexithymia that occurs with having ADHD (Kiraz et al., 2021). Reflective on how this internal struggle people may face can be dangerous when combined with the external factors of society's labelling and stigma. Additionally, if diagnosed while still in the education system, can be faced with negative perspectives and relationships (Shifrer, 2013). All contributing to how they view themselves and being unable to recognise the emotions associated with it. This lack of recognition aided in reevaluating what my identity was and meant, realising how there was more that I was taught to feel, rather than what I thought I was feeling. This recognition could only be possible from learning about identity from an interdisciplinary perspective. Acknowledging other views, both positive and negative, and why.

Through researching each discipline and where they overlap, aided in how to best portray to my past self of what identity means to me and what it meant to me before. Recognising how all the disciplines played a major role in shaping the meaning of identity.

Through combining my letter and reflective piece, I was able to incorporate various insights around the topic, integrating interdisciplinarity. By applying the knowledge from Psychology, it gave explanations for internal feelings and thoughts, sociology played a role in understanding the formation of these thoughts, in respect to labels and stereotypes. Simultaneously, recognising education as a major factor due to its early integration into people's lives, in addition to philosophy, which enables people to question themselves existentially; what is true and how they view their identity from different perspectives.

Initially, I didn't know what my identity was, but I know it is something taught, learnt and constantly being reshaped. Realising this, acknowledging my late diagnosis didn't mean my identity was changing, but rather, how I viewed my identity.

Starting and planning this SDA was quite difficult, as well as knowing how to incorporate the interdisciplinary aspects, as I had to break away from my psychology mindset that is engrained in me. Researching identity from an interdisciplinary view has helped me broaden my understanding in a wide range of topics, and to write freely which aided in enhancing my perspective. I recognised assumptions I didn't know I had and learning how to reflect on what I had learnt. Although you may be aware that internalised stigma exists, you could be oblivious to your own, potentially hindering your full potential in discovering what identity means to you. How a lack of responsibility from the education system means a lack of education for people as well, leading to labels and stereotypes without any concrete knowledge. Even though I have learnt so much through doing my SDA and relearning what identity means to me, I am still going to continue to question what my identity means and watch it reshape itself as I grow.

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