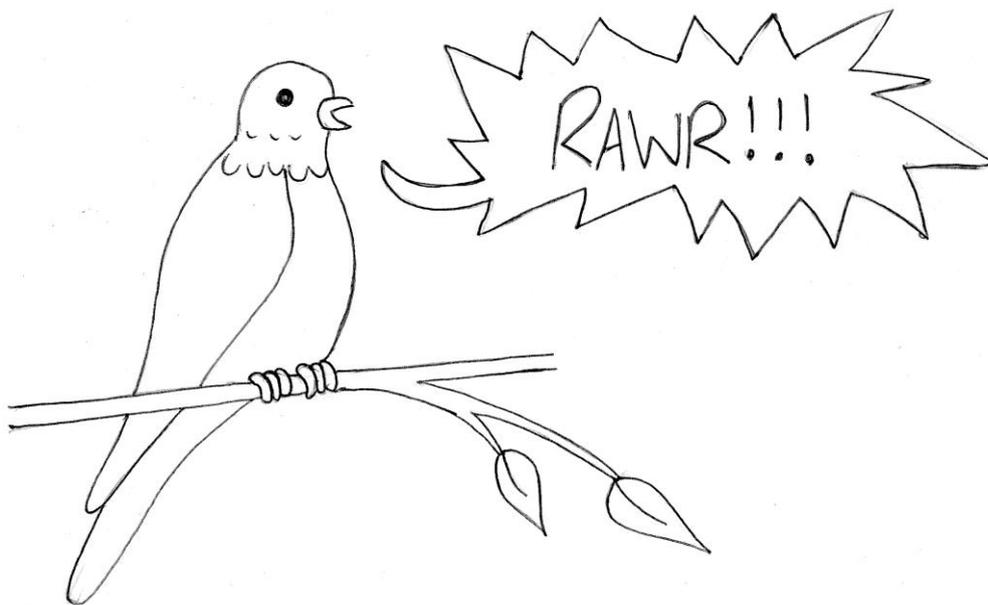


Life in another language:

Auditory Processing Disorder



Written and illustrated by Jennifer Tingle, case study with Auditory Processing Disorder. With Thanks to Camilla Leslie

Maybe someone you know has Auditory Processing Disorder, you have it yourself, or you just want to know more about it. There are books out there written by professionals and parents, but very few written by people with APD themselves. There are even less books by young people. I hope to give you an insider's view of what being a kid with Auditory Processing Disorder is like.

I was fifteen years old when I was diagnosed with serious APD. This meant that I was old enough to be able to understand my experiences with Johansen IAS therapy, but still young enough to remember my life before being diagnosed.

My mum knew that there was something slightly different about me from early on, but she couldn't work out what it was. I often misunderstood what people said but my hearing was always very acute. That ruled out hearing loss. When I was little, I was more interested in toys and objects than talking to other kids, and I took things very literally. My mum remembers when I was asked to play with the other little kids in the gym at preschool. The game involved pretending to be a car and running around the hall. I didn't want to play because I wasn't old enough to drive. Kids on the Autistic Spectrum can also seem uninterested in people and take things very seriously, but I showed too much empathy and didn't have tantrums, so my mum knew that autism wasn't what was different about me.

I always found it difficult to concentrate in class, and zoned out regularly. Some kids got in trouble for this, but because I was always well-behaved and worked very hard my teachers just thought I was a daydreamer.

I knew that there was something different about me, but I had no idea what it was. Despite getting good marks for my work at Primary School, I felt stupid because I couldn't understand what other kids were talking about. I had rubbish social skills and I knew it. I preferred working and playing on my own because it felt easier than having to talk to other children.

I didn't know that I had serious Auditory Processing Disorder. I didn't know that Auditory Processing Disorder even existed until I was 15 years old. I thought that you were either deaf, or your hearing was fine. Since I didn't hear a lot of things people said, I assumed that I was stupid. As far as I knew, everyone heard the same way as me, but they were smarter. More than once I asked my mum if I was autistic or if I had brain damage. I told her that if she had dropped me on my head as a baby, that was ok, I didn't mind, I just wanted to know. When she said no I felt relieved, but at the same time I was frustrated at being back to square one. I still felt that there was something different about me, and didn't know what it could be.

Other kids at school talked about pop stars and music. I didn't like pop music because of the singing. I knew that the songs they sang in the playground must have had words in the same vague way I accepted that the Earth was

round. When I listened to music I heard maybe two words in every song. The rest was just slurred together syllables and mouth noises with a mushy instrumental background. I remember going to a friend's house and moving my lips while they sang, pretending to know the words to a song about raining men. Again, I knew something wasn't quite right, but couldn't come up with anything apart from stupidity. I got on fairly well with the other kids in my year and had some good friends, but I didn't talk about the same things as them. In fact, I didn't talk that much in general and was known for being quiet. The reason I didn't join in with their conversations wasn't because I was quiet. I didn't know what they were talking about, so I had nothing to contribute. I could hear the sound of them speaking, but I hardly heard any words I knew. It was like everyone was talking in another language.

My work, grades and especially my homework started going downhill when I went to Secondary school. Like Primary school, I was always really tired when I got home from school. I was often off sick and missed big chunks of the topics we were learning. At my Primary school there were about 250 kids. At my Secondary School there were 1050 kids and the noise they made was enormous! Even in classrooms there was lots of background noise. I could hardly hear anything anyone said, and soon there were kids taking advantage of this. Almost every day, groups of girls would come up to me and ask me questions in funny voices then laugh at me. I couldn't tell what they were asking and sometimes had to just guess a "yes" or "no", which they found hilarious. I hoped that if I answered their stupid questions they would leave me alone. Sometimes I thought I heard them insult me, but I was never sure. How can you put bullies down with a witty comeback when you don't actually know if they are making fun of you? The tone of voice, sneering faces and the way they openly laughed at me was pretty obvious, but by now I was very insecure about my hearing even although I didn't know there was anything wrong with it, and I didn't trust anything I heard.

Music School

I was a kid with serious APD in a Music school. If there aren't any jokes about that, there should be.

I have always loved music and when I was nine years old I started learning to play the flute. I became very good at it, and loved playing. In my last year of Primary school, my teacher suggested that I audition for the music school which was joined with my local secondary school.

I suppose it's partly thanks to the music school that I was tested for Auditory Processing Disorder.

My mum started to wonder about my hearing when I was failing every listening test we did in Music. We had to write down which chords we heard. The other kids in my class were good at this, but I hardly ever got any right. All the different chords with their fancy roman numeral names sounded exactly the same to me. Often in chord-progression listening tests I guessed the opposite answer to what I actually thought, because it was more likely to be correct.

In one of the pre-exam tests we did, I answered that the solo instrument playing over the orchestra was an oboe, when it was actually a trombone.

This really puzzled my teachers. It was like they were thinking, "How could someone who's supposed to be so musical be so totally tone deaf"?

In the school orchestra I had trouble with tuning. Flat and sharp were difficult to tell apart, especially with background noise. Mandatory Choir sessions were even worse. I knew what notes I needed to sing, but they came out completely different to what I wanted. Pitching notes was impossible and while I was concentrating on pitching (and failing miserably) there's no way I could read the words on my sheet music at the same time. I didn't sing. I yodelled.

Processing Time-lag

With APD there is a processing time-lag which means that you might still be trying to understand the start of a conversation while the person speaking is near the end. Do you give up trying to process the first topic so you don't miss the second, or do you hope the first was more important and ignore the next thing they say, so that you can understand the first thing they said? This is a common dilemma if you have APD.

If I did hear everything correctly, I often forgot what had been said instantly afterwards. It's as if every time my brain moved onto processing the next word in a sentence, the word before that disappeared.

It's like the slogan on my dad's Homer Simpson fridge magnet: "Every time I learn something new, it pushes old stuff out of my brain".

Accents

Accents from different cities, countries and overseas phone calls are sometimes hard to understand, but it's even harder if you have Auditory Processing Disorder.

Music

Before Johansen IAS, I couldn't hear the words in songs. For all I knew the pop stars on TV and the radio were all singing in a different language. I could hear the tune, but only heard two or three words per song. The rest was gibberish. Because I'd never heard music properly, I didn't know it shouldn't sound like that.

To hear what songs sound like to someone with APD, I suggest looking up "[I'm Your's \(Ukulele\)](#)" on YouTube. This extremely talented little boy plays the ukulele and sings without seeming to know the words to the song.

Not only does watching this short video add to the number of views, (which this young musician totally deserves!) you can hear a song the way it sounds

to someone with APD. Definitely worth a look! I first saw this when I was round at a friend's house. We were both amazed at how good this boy was at the ukulele! It was only when my friend mentioned she thought the way he was making up the words was so cute, that I realized he wasn't singing in proper words. To me, the words sounded the same as the original version, which I often listened to at home.

Funnily enough, this was also the first entire song which I heard clearly, years later after Johansen Therapy.

Conversations

Probably the most confusing thing about APD is that since people with APD usually have no hearing loss, you don't actually know how much you've missed until you get the chance to think over what you just heard. If someone was talking to me, I sometimes only picked up one or two words in a sentence, so understanding them was bit of a guessing game. To guess more accurately what I didn't hear, I usually looked at the speaker's expression and checked if they were looking or pointing at something. If they were, they may have been talking about it. The expressions and posture of the other people listening was also very important. They probably heard whatever it was and I could copy their reaction so I knew whether to look sad, happy, startled, outraged, etc. Sometimes I got my reaction wrong and people got angry with me, but I was doing my best. If someone turned to you and shouted something which sounded like, "My snails are dancing!" while looking happy and pointing wildly, how would you react?

Would you look for said dancing snails? Or blame your sometimes very accurate hearing?



Often I only heard part of a sentence, or heard everything apart from the name of the thing the conversation was about, which made listening feel pointless.

For people with APD, just having a normal conversation can be very difficult. For example, I often wasn't sure whether to take someone literally or not. Like when someone says to you, "I had a bad day, don't ask". That means they actually want you to ask them about their bad day and be sympathetic. It took me a long time to work this out after years of just saying "Okay" and leaving them hanging.

Sarcasm is pretty mindboggling too. When it's difficult just to make out normal sentences, picking up on different tones of voice is impossible.

It's common for people with APD to be very, very gullible.

I've had lots of friends who have made stuff up and I've believed them. When I was five I got really frustrated that my mum wouldn't believe me when I told her my best friend could breathe underwater.

I was an abnormally honest person, not because I was some kind of saint, but because lies were so hard to get my head around. When just hearing speech is really hard, lying is not worth the extra effort.

It would be great if I could translate everything I heard wrong into normal English, if there was an official Gibberish Dictionary, but that's not how APD works. The same sentence could sound different depending on where you are, how much noise there is and how much energy and concentration you have. And even if you hear everything someone said, you might forget it all as soon as they finish speaking.

Great Hearing Mistakes, social AWKWARDNESS
& some horrible misunderstandings

“Our Father who art in Heaven, Harold be thy name”

How to lose a friend in 10 seconds

In a noisy classroom on a Monday morning, a friend walked over to chat to me.

“Hi! How’re you?” she asked. I said I was fine thanks and asked if she had a good weekend. Unfortunately because of the noise in the room, I couldn’t tell what she said. This is roughly what I heard:

“Erig teril groob de weekend edin uncle eed. Erdwot sop”.

So, I knew that what she said about her weekend involved an uncle. Feeling too stupid to ask her to repeat what she said, and knowing that hearing it again was pointless anyway, I looked at her face. She wasn’t smiling but then she didn’t look too unhappy either. Hoping she had a good weekend, I hazarded smiling and saying “That’s nice!”

She looked offended to hear this.

“He died”, she told me.

Roaring pigeon

One day I was in the garden and a pigeon flapped onto a branch of the tree above me. It sat there looking at me, then opened its beak and roared like a lion.

Burp if you love Maths

Sometimes Auditory Processing Disorder can even change sounds and swap them around. When my hearing was at its worst I saw people talking, but heard noises like falling rocks, clicks, guitar chords, squeaks and low rumbles like car engines. There was one time I was in maths and the teacher asked a question. She pointed to one of the boys in my class with his hand up, and

he burped at her. I expected her to be furious and chuck him out of the classroom, with the whole class giggling, but nothing happened. “Well done, that’s the right answer” she said, calmly chalking a number onto a squiggle on the board.

The Cheese Sandwichers

It was lunchtime, and I was washing my hands at the sink in the girls’ toilet when a pair of the girls who often picked on me walked through the door. Obviously they couldn’t bear being separated even to pee. They spotted me and walked over. “Hello, *Tingle*” one of them said to me. They asked me some of their usual pointless questions. I only knew they were questions because the pitch of their voices went up before they waited for me to say something. I just stared and looked confused until one of them said something I could partly understand.

“What did you....lunch?” I assumed she was asking me what I’d been doing. I told her I’d been in the library. “No”, she said slowly, as if she was talking to a small child, her orange-faced pal giggling next to her, “What did you *eat* for lunch?” Why on earth would that interest them?

“A cheese sandwich”, I said.

More giggling. “We’re not very nice, are we?” the one with the glowing orange skin asked me.

I knew the answer to *this*. “No, you’re not”, I replied. They were speechless for a few seconds. Then they cracked up, laughing so hard they had to hold onto the sinks. I really hoped they peed themselves.

“Ohhh, she doesn’t think we’re nice”, the first girl mock-wailed. “We were talking about the sandwiches!” the orange one laughed. I walked out of there fast. At least they were laughing too hard to follow me.

Funnily enough, that was the last time they ever bothered me. Once they knew that I didn’t like them, they left me alone.

I thought Christians stole my soul

People with APD sometimes take things very literally. Horrifyingly literally. We can't help it. When I was ten years old I went to a Christian outdoor weekend. I loved the climbing course there. The fantastic ropes, nets and wooden climbing frames won me over, despite me never having much enthusiasm for religion. On the first morning, before the afternoon activities started, we were in a room with a teacher reading the bible. I found it boring, but I was quiet and paid attention. At the end of the lesson, our teacher asked us if we were ready to join God forever. The other kids in my class didn't take this very seriously, they just said yes and giggled a bit, but the idea freaked me out. I asked the teacher if I could think about it. I was only ten. I didn't want to do anything forever! I hadn't said yes, but I didn't say no either. I spent the rest of the weekend terrified that I belonged to God forever, and I had no soul, because it didn't belong to me anymore.

Guide camp

For two and a half days my guide section went to the camp in the country where we slept in tents and went on scavenger hunts and other outdoorsy stuff. I joined in with the activities and enjoyed painting a t-shirt, but what confused me was that when there wasn't an activity in the big hut, everybody would disappear. I sat in front of the tent and wondered where they'd gone. Nobody came looking for me, so if they were all off somewhere on an activity, they had probably forgotten about me. Eventually they came back like I knew they would and I joined in with whatever they were doing. It was only on the last day that I found a poster in the hut showing a rota for activities away from the camping field that I realised where the other kids had been. The guide leaders had probably told us about the rota on the first night, but I hadn't heard them.

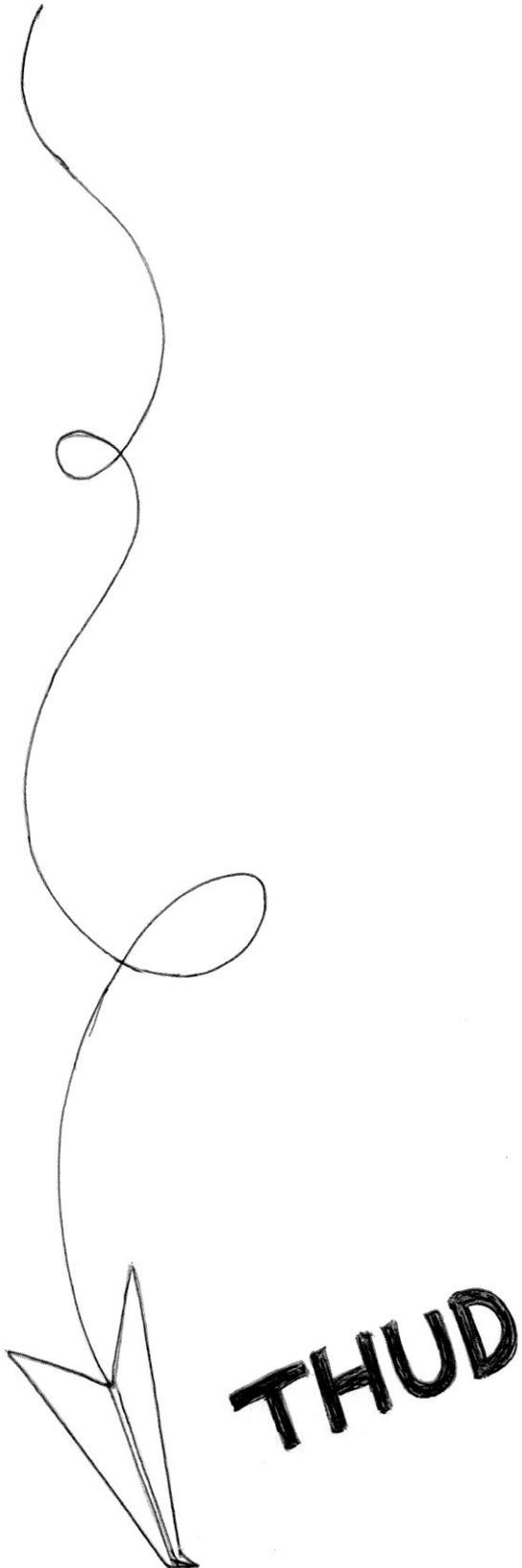
Silent lunch bell

Near the end of lunchtime I was finishing my food when suddenly all the other kids stood up and marched away towards the classrooms. The school bell was always been painfully loud, but for some reason I didn't hear it that time. The hundreds of kids getting up en masse at the same time for no apparent reason was spooky.

Mysteriously disappearing class

One day at primary school, I was concentrating so hard on reading and ignoring background noise that I didn't notice my class had left the room. I looked up from my book and the classroom was empty apart from me. I didn't hear the teacher say we were going to a different room or to PE, and I didn't hear the other kids leaving. Because I was reading quietly, the teacher had probably forgotten about me in the shuffle. Since things like this seemed to happen to me every so often, I wasn't that worried, but I still felt sheepish when I found a teacher in the corridor and had to tell them that my class had disappeared and I didn't know where they were.

Bad hearing Days



Sometimes when I was very tired, stressed, emotional or coming down with a bug, I had really bad hearing days. On these days my hearing went out the window completely and everything was incredibly loud, as if I was standing right next to a huge disco speaker. Everything sounded really weird. Even when I found out I had Auditory Processing Disorder, I still didn't know that I had Synaesthesia, so I assumed the sounds with almost physical forms and colours flying through the air and slamming into me were just part of my hearing problems. (I focus on Synaesthesia in another File)

This is what I remember from one of my bad hearing days at school when I had just started Johansen IAS treatment.

I remember seeing a boy shouting to his friend in the stairwell, but hearing an electric guitar chord instead of a human voice. In front of me, the zipper on someone's schoolbag kept ringing almost unbearably loudly with every step they took. It was driving me nuts! Just after the bell, when the corridors were crammed with people, the school was a horrible, deafening mess of noise. Everyone was talking incredibly loudly and there were so many of them. The noise was overwhelming. I just wanted to curl up on the floor and wait until the corridors and my head cleared. I reached the main atrium with people streaming around me. A white paper plane glided down from the second floor and landed on a table with a thud as if it was a half-brick.

On a really bad hearing day it was hard to be talked to and to talk back. I couldn't remember anything anyone said and their voices were sometimes painful to listen to. Whenever my hearing wasn't great, talking to people was hard. Not just because I might not have heard what they said, but because it felt physically difficult to talk. I felt like my mouth was thick and heavy, like when you've been outdoors in the winter and your face goes numb. Thinking of the right words to say what I meant took forever, and pronouncing words was hard too.

My family told me (because I couldn't hear this) that when I got tired I slurred my words and spoke too quietly. I used to hate speaking at a "normal" volume because I felt like I was shouting. Sometimes I found it hard to speak when I felt under pressure, like answering a question in class, and my voice would just come out in a squeak or a croak and I'd have to try again. I only realized the problems I had with speech when I was half way through Johansen IAS and started to hear my own voice properly. I'd never noticed before how much I stuttered, slurred, and how my voice sometimes went up and down in the middle of a sentence when I didn't want it to. Until then, I'd been listening more to how my voice sounded in my head, than how it sounded to my ears.