

"I panic when I talk to people"

Lizzy, 20, suffers from Aspergers Syndrome, a disability that makes her freak out at the most ordinary of social situations.



Lizzy won't let her condition prevent her from playing hockey for Australia.

"While most girls my age have boyfriends, go out every weekend and can start a conversation without even thinking about it, those things are like running a marathon for me. This is because I have Aspergers Syndrome, sometimes called a social disability. I was first diagnosed with Aspergers in 2002, after I left school. I now take medication to control my anxiety and mood, which makes things a little bit better, but having Aspergers makes it very hard for me to make conversation with people my own age – I tend to get on better with younger children and older adults. I also get very anxious and nervous in certain social situations, for

the point of throwing up coz your routine has been interrupted, and developing obsessions with things. I've gone through a few fixations. The longest fixation I've had lasted six or seven years. I was fixated on *South Park*, Pokemon and Eminem. My room was covered in Pokemon at one time. And when it was Eminem I'd sing his songs all the time and I'd walk around the house going 'Yo, yo, yo, yo, whatcha doing, ma?' When it was *South Park* I'd walk around singing songs from the movie. Then all of a sudden it'll just stop. At the moment I'm obsessed with *The Lord of the Rings*. I spent \$3000 on eBay on *Lord of the Rings* stuff in two months. My dad ended up having to take his credit card details off there.

the other girls and I was like, 'Why are you telling me this?' So I stopped doing it. There are people who don't accept me for who I am; they delight in shoving me over in a game and laughing at me for my 'weirdness'. They've already classed me as strange so they'll talk about me. It's upsetting, but I'm not going to let them put me off.

My dad often says that I am brave for continuing to play in-line hockey coz lots of the people there don't accept me for who I am. Most people would give up the sport, if only to escape from the comments and hurtful remarks, but I don't like running away from trouble; if I did that, I would never leave the house. I wanted to share my story coz I know there are a lot of people out there who are different and they get a hard time. I just wanted to highlight that even if you're different you can still do things. I just wish people would give difference a chance, coz if we were all the same it'd be very boring."

"Even something as simple as making a joke is almost impossible for me."

example, if a group of boys came up to me, I would get nervous and try to find a way out!

I watch other 'normal' girls who are 20 and have boyfriends and I feel sad that I can't talk to boys like they can. I just don't know what to say and many boys think I'm weird or strange. It can get really lonely at times. I do have one close friend, Ben*, who lives at the end of my street. He's been my best friend for about eight years. He's stuck by me through everything. Even when I wasn't on medication and I'd just get upset over the most silly things and I stopped speaking to him for months at a time, he'd still come back and say hello. He's definitely one of the people who have helped me keep pushing on.

Even something as simple as making a joke is almost impossible for me. Girls on my hockey team will make jokes but I can't, sometimes I'll even have trouble understanding what was so funny about what they've said.

Other side effects of having Aspergers can include being extremely routine driven – to

I've been going to an Aspergers group since last year and the guy who runs it is great. He genuinely cares about us and organises regular outings. As Aspergers is mainly a male's illness, there are very few girls in the group so it's quite a good place to scope out boys who have the same handicap as me. No one judges anyone else at the group; we're all in the same boat together and it's great to go out with people knowing that I can be myself, no matter what.

My love of in-line hockey has also been amazing in helping me to deal with my condition. I've been playing hockey for five years and have played for NSW several times; I'm even off to New Zealand to play for Australia in the Oceania In-Line Championships. I love it, but it can also be hard for me. I used to do a newsletter for my hockey club and everyone else liked it but this one mother said to me, 'Oh, no one likes your newsletter, you're weird. People think you're weird.' She started gossiping about me to

what is Aspergers Syndrome?

* Aspergers Syndrome (named after Viennese physician Hans Asperger who uncovered the disorder in 1944) is a neurobiological disorder, most commonly found in boys. Those with Aspergers have normal intelligence but exhibit autistic-like behaviour and poor communication skills.

* People with Aspergers show a noticeable deficiency in social skills, have trouble dealing with change, develop obsessive routines and may become preoccupied with a particular subject. They also have difficulty interpreting other people's body language. Many individuals however, show exceptional skill or talent in a specific area.