So, today I'm going to talk a little bit about gender and autism, because there are actually some specific issues which women on the spectrum experience which are quite distinct from the issues that men on the spectrum experience.

And the thing about autism that I don't think was well understood even as recently as 20 years ago, there is a slightly different presentation, generally - of course, we're all individuals - but with people on the autism spectrum, the boy type of autism and the girl type of autism are actually quite different. And, as I say, there is overlap and it's not... The thing about autism is that if you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.

So I can't say there aren't variations for individuals, but there certainly are, generally, the boy or the girl with autism look a little bit different. And in the past, clinicians were only really aware of the boy type, so to speak, so when I was diagnosed in 1994 with Asperger's syndrome, I was told that one in 25 people on the autism spectrum was a girl, or a woman, and that was... that was what was believed, because clinicians simply didn't have the understanding or awareness of what autism looks like with women.

And this led in my case to a lot of invalidating and inappropriate psychiatric treatment, to people denying that I had autism. I never really understood what was going on. And I thought, "Well, I have this diagnosis," and I was told it was consistent with the diagnostic criteria for Asperger's - that I reached all the diagnostic criteria for a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. And yet I still had psychiatrists saying, "Oh, no - I met someone with Asperger's. "He wasn't like you. You mustn't have it." And it was a real issue. It was very difficult to get appropriate help and to be understood that I might have had some mental health issues but I also have autism.

And as a result, I always doubted that I was on the spectrum, and I think this is very, very common for women on the spectrum, particularly adult women who might have grown up at a time where the diagnosis wasn't available - that we think we're on the spectrum but we're not quite sure.
And it took me years... In fact, even after I wrote an autobiography about having undiagnosed Asperger’s - so I’d told the world about my diagnosis - I still did not believe it, because I kept getting all these contradictory views.

The only time I believed it... And I really wish that every woman on the spectrum would have a similar experience, ’cause it was wonderful. I spoke at a conference in 2009. It was a conference about autism with women and girls. And...Tony Attwood, the clinician, very well-known clinician, ran it, and the first day was just your average conference and I spoke at that. It was just talks and everyone sort of listened. The second day was a sort of facilitated discussion with about 100 women on the autism spectrum. And, at that point, after meeting 100 people who were essentially very similar to me, I realised I must be on the spectrum but I have the girl type, you know? I’m more the...the woman on the spectrum.

So I’m very keen on encouraging women on the spectrum who may be undiagnosed or self-diagnosed to actually go and see a clinician who is an expert around diagnosing women with autism and working with women with autism, because it can really help.

And I do one thing - I do my own little bit. It’s not as much as a lot of people do, but I run...well, I co-facilitate a women’s group in Canberra for women on the autism spectrum, and it is a lovely thing. It’s such a good thing to do. I get a lot of support from it myself from the other women.

Generally, we just have a discussion. And it sort of varies who comes along. There’s people who have been coming along from the start, which was five years ago. There’s other people who come a few times and dip in and dip out. So it’s a lovely group, and I’ve had people describe it as “the best thing in my life” and “a haven”.

So, for some women, being able to discuss the kinds of issues you’re experiencing with people who understand where you’re coming from is just wonderful, and I really recommend for people with autism - men and women - to be part of an autistic peer group, because that is often where we find belonging.

And for women, to find other women who understand where you’re coming from is a great thing, and I would hope that for everyone.

So just some takeaways - there are gender-related differences, or there often are gender-related differences, and some women can get missed, girls can get missed because the profile is slightly different. But there are many women on the autism spectrum. I suspect it’s a lot higher ratio than 25 to 1. I suspect it’s more like either 1 to 1 or 1.5 to 1. I think there’s a lot more of us than people think.

So, thank you for listening, and I really hope you enjoy the rest of the course.