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## **Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs – Securing a Career I Love**

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## Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs - Securing a Career I Love

Blake "Crash" Priddle

### Abstract

From non-verbal to radio announcer...how did I find my voice and rightful place in society? With 85% of my autistic peers not having meaningful employment, this memoir excerpt highlights the facilitators that appeared in my life and kept me from becoming a part of this dismal statistic. Echolalia, dysfluency, sensory disintegration, anxiety, depression and OCD aside, the real fight is shifting society to "walk the talk" and make our schools, workplaces and communities truly inclusive. I take you through the highs and lows of gaining job and life experiences starting as a young teen and into adulthood, building on my passion for working in broadcasting.

### Resumé

De personne non parlante à animateur de radio... Comment ai-je trouvé ma voix et ma place légitime dans la société? Alors que 85 % de mes pairs autistes n'ont pas d'emploi significatif, cet extrait de mes mémoires met en lumière les facilitateurs qui sont arrivés dans ma vie et m'ont empêché de faire partie de cette triste statistique. Outre l'écholalie, le trouble de fluidité verbale, la désintégration sensorielle, l'anxiété, la dépression et les TOC, le véritable combat consiste à amener la société à « joindre le geste à la parole » et à faire de nos écoles, de nos milieux de travail et de nos lieux des endroits véritablement inclusifs. Je vous emmène à travers les hauts et les bas de ma recherche d'emploi et de ma quête d'expériences de vie, depuis l'adolescence jusqu'à l'âge adulte, en m'appuyant sur ma passion pour la radiodiffusion.

### Keywords

*work environment, strengths-based, autism, employment supports, adulthood*

### Mots-clés

*environnement de travail, axés sur les forces, autisme, aide à l'emploi, adulte*

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Being **autistic** evokes emotions, stereotypes, hopes, dreams, worries and wonders in autistic and non-autistic people. People in the autistic community turn to numerous sources to gain a handle on this disability, this other-worldly way of being and viewing the world. Along with my parents, I have gleaned a lot of insight from one such source - Dr. Temple Grandin. While not representative of all folks on the autism spectrum, Temple is an extraordinary role model. In a 2016 media interview with me, Dr. Grandin shared her views on what it takes for autistic individuals to reach their full potential. The interview was conducted at a special autism event where Dr. Grandin was the keynote speaker in Sault Saint Marie, Ontario. Here's an excerpt:

**Me:** *I'd like to chat with you about what tips you'd give to help autistic people reach their full potential.*

**Temple Grandin:** *I have to tell parents, depending on the age of their kid, if you have a three-year-old that's not talking, you need to get him into a really good early intervention program. I recommend they start doing jobs when they're in middle school - paper route, walking dogs. Getting job experience before you graduate from high school and college is a really good idea.*

**Me:** *Eighty-five percent of adults with autism are either unemployed or underemployed. What do you think it will take to change this problem?*

**Temple Grandin:** *Well, the way I got paid work was being really good at what I do. And selling to people based on the portfolio of my work designing cattle facilities writing articles for cattle magazines. That's how I started. Get really good at a skill other people want. I would take my drawings out, and I would show them, and they'd go, "oh, you did that?" And then, I would get a job at another feed yard to design a facility. Get good at something because you're not going to do very well in the job interview.*

**Me:** *What workplace accommodations have helped you succeed?*

**Temple Grandin:** *Well, fortunately, there were some good people in the cattle industry that helped me. The movie Temple Grandin, 2010 showed people that were bad and good to me. (Mick, J. (2010). Temple Grandin. HBO) The boss needs to just help and coach the person on some of the social mistakes, and they can't be vague. (Grandin, 2016)*

With most of my autistic peers not having gainful employment, what facilitators entered in my life that kept me from becoming part of this dismal statistic? Today I am a news reporter and radio personality. I wasn't really verbal until I was about five, and when I did talk, I had echolalia and difficulty understanding what people were saying. Fast forward 20+ years, and here I am - making a living TALKING on the radio! How did this come about? I sum up my path towards working and living independently through the subsequent trials, tribulations and triumphs.

**Figure 1**

*Temple Grandin and me - Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, Canada, 2016*



[A photo of me interviewing Temple Grandin at a conference in Sault Ste Marie, Ontario.]

## **Trials**

### ***Lesson 1: When you are a kid, get a job and learn what work is like***

There is a first time for everything, and a job is one of those things for most people. In grade 8, my mom got me involved in a program that helped autistic teens prepare for the workforce. She had to take time off work to drive me 70 km each week to the program, but she says it was worth it. It covered all the basic aspects of the workplace - things like what to do in a job interview, how to behave on the job, and how to deal with customers.

This first job didn't just happen. My mom was instrumental in helping create the Supported Employment Program. She sat on the Board of Directors of the agency offering the program and then used that as leverage to bring the program to my rural town. Another example of her acting as my advocate.

It's important for everyone, autistics included, to be engaged and/or employed in one way or another. Gaining experience is key to future employment successes, whether part-time or volunteering. Match passions with potential work activities. While more autistic-tailored job training programs are becoming available, we still have a long way to go for all of us to have meaningful and inclusive work, especially in rural and northern communities.

### **Figure 2**

*Me in my itchy polyester grocery store uniform*



[A photo of me in my itchy polyester grocery store uniform from my first high school job]

I was fortunate to obtain a job at a local grocery store. The owners (who my parents knew) understood I needed accommodations. They were willing to give me only two, 3-hour shifts a week since I was already overwhelmed with high school. My position was "front end service clerk", which to me is a fancy term for a janitor since a good amount of my time was spent bringing in shopping carts from the cart corral.

During my first month of training, my job mentors were very helpful. Job mentors were my peer employees who took extra time and effort to ensure I was successful at my job. The job coaches were from the supportive employment program, and they provided a bit of training for the job mentors and me. For instance, they made a special pocketbook that contained instructions for my job, step by step. The tasks were listed in the proper order, with pictures and words, and perfectly organized.

Things went well during the three years working at the grocery store. I recall dealing with only one rude customer. I was asked to help load some bags of soil into a car, and due to miscommunication, I thought I was just supposed to put it in one bag, not eight. So, after I had loaded one, the customer stood by his car, and I wondered why he wasn't leaving. He ended up uploading the rest of the bags by himself, and then he got upset with me. I didn't react! The owners and my supervisors liked my efficiency, and I had always asked if there was anything else I could do before I punched out. This first job helped prepare me for the workforce.

### ***Lesson 2: Find your passion and volunteer to gain experience***

Even as a kid, I knew I wanted to have a career in media, anything from a news reporter to actor or radio personality. As luck would have it, my high school had a program called Spartan Youth Radio (SYR), a media club that specialized in podcasts. My mom and dad told me if I wanted to pursue a career in media, it would be best to get as much experience as possible, so I joined SYR. I was mentored by Media Arts and my English teacher Mr. Stewart, better known as Mister Stew, who recalled my time at SYR: "What did I notice differently about Blake? Everything. And nothing. He was a teenager who wanted to be loved, wanted to catch the attention of the right girl, wanted to do well in school, wanted to catch the biggest fish, but Blake was and is so much more than that. I noticed in him a passion for a world that often confused him. I saw him go through mental breakdowns where he misinterpreted what someone said or missed out on someone's body language or in times where others misunderstood him. There was a time when he quit SYR altogether because of one of these misinterpretations. When I heard that Blake was pursuing radio broadcasting, I was elated. Even if it was a short-term career, I knew that spending time in the real world and working with a broadcasting team would be good for his maturity and sense of empowerment. Like SYR, you're all kinds of different, and we celebrate that!"

### ***Lesson 3: Gear your career interests with school placements and internships***

I knew I needed to get experience in a real radio station, so I applied for a high school co-operative education placement at the local station. I landed a half-day placement with the morning show host. He was very friendly and understanding of my challenges. I learned how to host a show, how a radio station works, and how radio commercials are made. The best part was getting to co-host and have a few laughs on the morning show.

**Figure 3**

*First time on radio, my high school co-op placement, Moose FM, Espanola*



[A photo of me during my first radio broadcast at my high school co-op placement.]

After graduating high school, I worked the summer at the local newspaper, The Mid North Monitor as a freelance journalist. I was mentored by a compassionate editor, who, besides having radio experience, had lots of patience to show me the ropes.

***Lesson 4: To disclose or not disclose - depends on when, where and to whom***

I disclosed my autism to my college professors during the second semester. We had a big test towards the end of the first year, and I had studied hard for it, but once I saw the test, the questions were written in a way that I didn't understand. I handed the test in without writing much on it. This was really embarrassing as I am not a quitter, but I didn't know what to do. My mom encouraged me to explain my situation to the professor and ask if she could rephrase the questions while doing the test orally.

I explained to my professor that I have autism, and sometimes I need things to be rephrased. She didn't hesitate and read the questions to me again and rephrased them in a way that I would understand. The result - a passing grade!

***Lesson 5: Get even more relevant experience in the summers while at college***

With the help of a YMCA employment support program for people with disabilities, I secured a summer job at the radio station on Manitoulin Island. The job developer cautioned my mom that this workplace is very laid back and thus appeared disorganized. The job developer worried it wouldn't suit me since she thought autistic people have a hard time with chaos. My mom laughed, saying that I may be autistic, but I was extremely disorganized and couldn't care less if things "weren't in order".

I was hired and quickly learned this would be a fun place to work because the staff was very friendly. The co-owner was a fantastic mentor. Within a week, I was writing, voicing and producing commercials and announcing the Community Happenings segment.

### ***Got my diploma, now what?!***

Once I finished the Radio Broadcasting program at Loyalist College, it was time to find a full-time job. I underestimated just how hard that would be. I had assumed that if I had a college diploma, I would get a job in my field easily. I was wrong. It was the classic dilemma - I couldn't get a job because I didn't have enough experience, and I couldn't get more experience without a job. So, I decided to do what was needed to build my resume and industry skills while fine-tuning my life skills.

Fortunately, the Manitoulin radio station owners gave me a part-time, limited contract position. Since I was only part-time, I kept applying for full-time radio jobs. After airing one of the first episodes of my weekly Crash's Campfire show, I learned the importance of being more vigilant and double-checking content before putting it on the air. I had found a song online and played it on my show, not knowing it contained offensive lyrics. Once I realized this, I was frozen with fear, and I didn't know what would happen next. Would I get fired? Would I be thought of poorly by the public? It was more than I could bear, and I had a panic attack. In between breaths, I managed to tell my boss what had happened. She assured me that I wasn't going to get fired, and the worst-case scenario is that they would need to do some damage control. I had been so excited about hosting and airing my own show, and I had messed up.

Fortunately, this experience was not in vain, and it has since made me a better broadcaster. I now listen to all the content I plan to put on the air. At the end of my contract, I didn't get hired, but they were supportive in allowing me to volunteer twice a week. I owe a lot to the owner, who was also a great mentor. This experience helped kick start my radio career.

### ***Lesson 6: We all need a life coach at times***

I started seeing a life coach, Theresa. I was wary at first, thinking I didn't need a coach. My parents lined up a grant to help offset the cost. It turned out that Theresa was one of the best things to happen to me!

Theresa recommended that I increase my social media presence, so I started a Facebook page so that people could follow me and keep up-to-date with what I was doing. She helped me to polish and organize my resume and applications. Unfortunately, none of the places I applied to ever got back to me, but it was a good experience nonetheless.

### ***My educational journey and job search continues.***

I went back to college for a summer institute at Seneca College to continue building my journalism skills. My profs and peers knew of my diagnosis and my accommodations and strengths. Everyone was so supportive. Once the post-graduate course was over, I had something else to add to my resume and another certificate to hang on my wall, but looking for a full-time job continued to be a battle. I now had a professional demo website with samples of my television reporting and radio talk breaks. Theresa and I met most days to expand my efforts at getting my portfolio out, applying for jobs posted, cold calls and setting up informational interviews.

### ***Lesson 7: No job yet, so volunteer and freelance in my field***

During my job search, I discovered that Laurentian University had a volunteer-run radio station (CKLU). I pitched a show called "Laurentian Mornings" that would play a variety of music and give students updates on local events. I hosted this show until I found a full time, paying radio job.

**Figure 4**

*A face for radio!*



[A photo of me broadcasting a weather segment]

I continued to look for full-time employment. I found an ad for a freelance journalist for a Sudbury-based magazine called Talent North, showcasing local talent. I sought the chance right away to make some pocket money and gain writing experience.

I was frustrated that I never got an interview for any jobs I applied for, no matter what I did. Once again, I found myself questioning whether it was my autism that was preventing me from getting a media job. The other issue I felt I was facing is that workplaces often fail to make accommodations for disabled workers or don't take the time to learn about autism and what we need. I had been told that radio and television are both competitive markets that are hard to break into. I wasn't the only one not getting hired - most of my former classmates were also struggling to get work.

Sage advice, a radio station employee gave me during an informational interview, is that if I wanted a career in radio, I should take any available job to get my foot in the door.

### **Tribulations**

#### ***First career job: What seemed like a failure but wasn't***

After two years of sending out resumes, volunteering, and doing informational interviews, I finally received the call I had hoped for. A radio station in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, hired me for a news reporter/host position.

I had made all the preparations that I could, but nothing could prepare me for this next chapter of my life, a chapter that has shaped me into a much wiser person.

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### ***Out of my depth initially, but support was close by***

While co-hosting with Ashley, I made occasional pronunciation and news story mistakes. I was not very good at receiving feedback, but I would apologize to Ashley once I calmed down. Without Ashley's straightforward constructive criticism and support, I might not have learned to sharpen my interviewing and research skills, which I needed to become the journalist and radio host I am today.

At first, it seemed like the perfect job, but there was a lot of unease and continuous staff turnover in the workplace. My anxiety started to grow about two months into the job. This was the first time that my OCD fear of germs came back in a long time. I was also afraid of being fired. One day, it got so bad that I had to take an anxiety pill to calm me down.

My biggest problem was not getting along well with one other employee. I made the mistake of inadvertently upsetting them when I pointed out mistakes in this person's story calmly and positively. I have never handled verbal conflict very well, and I know it's one of my main anxiety triggers. I felt a panic attack coming on. The next thing I knew, I could not talk and struggled to breathe. Ashley and another staff member both tried to reassure me.

Another challenge I had was the company's expectations. I believe, in hindsight, that they wanted me to hit the ground running and expected me to have more knowledge and experience than I had. Yet I had expected more guidance and orientation. Not a good fit.

Frankly, you don't need to know all the details, but it was a toxic environment for me. I dreaded the idea of going to work, and I was crying myself to sleep some nights and waking up in the morning hating my life.

### ***Lesson 8: One door closes, another opens...eventually***

After 9 months on the job, I would finally learn my post-probationary fate. I had butterflies in my tummy and had had trouble sleeping the past few nights before the decision was announced. While my immediate supervisor had emailed me and recommended that I be hired permanently, the final decision lay with the boss - who had a different response. I was being let go. They needed someone who could work more independently and had more experience. My first assumption was that they were treating me this way because of my autism, but they confirmed it had nothing to do with my termination. I was still devastated, and I held back tears for the remainder of the meeting. I wanted to get angry, yell and insult, but somehow, I didn't. I pulled myself together, took a deep breath, and thanked them for giving me this amazing opportunity. I shook their hands and left the office.

I walked home, only a few blocks away, but the walk somehow felt longer. I didn't know what I was going to tell my parents, and I felt like I had embarrassed not only myself but my entire family and that I had messed up my life for good. I felt this way because I was always under the impression that if you get fired, your chances of getting another job are unlikely.

Everything was so uncertain at this point: Would I ever work in media again? Am I a failure? In a way, I was happy that I didn't have to work there anymore because it really was a toxic environment for me, but it was just so hard to get out this way. I told my parents the news over the phone. I was so worried about what they would say, but they were proud of me for everything that I did, and they assured me that my career in media wasn't over but just beginning.

I was deeply saddened and disturbed by everything that had transpired, and I admit that I had more drinks than I should have that night. I ended up calling a local crisis phone line because, for the first time in a long time, I was having thoughts of suicide. I really didn't want to kill myself, but I was in a lot of pain. When I ended the conversation, it occurred to me that in the movie *Cast*

Away, Chuck Noland wanted to end it all because he felt that he would never get off the island he was stranded on. Still, one day the tide came in and gave him a piece of plastic that he used as a makeshift sail to get off the island. He said, "You have to keep breathing because tomorrow the sun will rise - who knows what the tide could bring."

Losing my first media job didn't ruin my life. I went outside my comfort zone. I tried new things. I saw new places. If it weren't for this experience, which was ultimately a stepping stone for my career, I might still be living in Mom and Dad's basement. Sure, things were still uncertain, and I didn't know what would happen next, but I would continue to learn, grow and get experience.

I will hand the mic over to work colleague Ashley and my Mom and Dad to share their points of view of this chapter of my life.

**Ashley:**

At first, Blake was timid and shy, but then he started to find his voice. It was a difficult atmosphere to navigate with a lot of hostility and ego, but he tried to blend in. Blake was very stuck in his ways. He always had to have things a particular way, and he would ask a lot of questions for clarification. The hardest thing that I have encountered so far in my adult life is when Blake was being bullied. I remember sitting on the front porch of the station talking with another person, and there was an eruption from inside. Blake walked out stark white in the face and had a breakdown. We were already good friends by this time, and it was hard for me to see him like that.

There were a lot of instances where Blake would misinterpret what people were trying to say. Some people would not take the time to understand what he was saying or to explain to him what was going on. I think that the best approach to helping Blake cope was to treat him with respect as any person deserves and patiently explain what was going on in a way he could understand.

I would say to future employers and work colleagues of Blake's: Don't be ignorant. Take some time, ask questions, and learn to do things differently to help the autistic person with transitions and new information.

When I found out Blake was autistic, it changed my view of him and other people on the spectrum. I knew little about autism and what came along with it. Blake has proven to be an outstanding friend, an amazing person and a fantastic co-host. When Blake taught me about autism, I gained so much respect for him and his perseverance to help other people understand. I think that Blake is a super tough individual with a lot of drive and compassion, and I am really proud of him for going through all of that crap and coming out with his head held high. Most people couldn't muster half the integrity that he has.

Ashley left the station a few months after I did - on to greener pastures for both of us!

**Mom:**

In some ways, we may have contributed to Blake's failure at this job. How? Two ways: First, by inadvertently setting him up to believe that his employer would provide him with solid onboarding, training, and orientation. I came from a large employer with extensive orientation for new hires, especially recent graduates. At my workplace, orientation training would take weeks with mentors after the new employee got their feet wet on tasks.

Secondly, I think the whole issue of disclosure is full of pitfalls - for both the new employee/ interviewee and the employer. When one has an invisible disability like ASD, if you disclose during your interview, chances are the phone won't ring for a callback; if you are fortunate to get hired, when do you inform them about your disability? After your probation? What if you need a few simple accommodations to make you succeed but don't want to ask for them if you are being singled out?

I think this first career job taught Blake:

- That there are always going to be bullies at work. The key is to learn not to be one and stay away from them!
- To learn to control one's anger.
- To handle feedback more constructively.
- To ask for help - it's a sign of strength, not weakness.
- To disclose his autism alongside strategies to succeed.

**Dad:**

What Blake experienced was a bunch of life lessons that eventually have made him stronger. It was painful to witness from afar. Since I usually don't spend a lot of time talking through issues every week, I would send a wise quote to help him through this challenging work experience. Below are some I sent Blake to give him some comfort in knowing he wasn't alone - after all, 'what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

- Stop being afraid of what could go wrong and start being excited about what could go right.
- Difficult roads often lead to beautiful destinations.
- Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body; it calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.
- Tough times don't last; tough people do.

**Triumphs**

***A new beginning at Arctic Radio and living in The Pas***

A few months later, I interviewed for a job at a radio station in The Pas, northern Manitoba, to work as a news reporter. Even though it wasn't a hosting job, I felt the need to think "outside the box" and apply for the job with hopes that I could get a hosting opportunity while working in the news. When I was offered the job, I accepted. They said I could also host a show or do some voiceover work on a volunteer basis. This made me want to accept the job right away, but I wasn't sure how good I would be at covering the news because I had needed some help at my previous job with getting accurate information. My confidence had been crushed. I felt that I was better at covering human interest stories. Mom and Dad assured me that I would do just fine. I accepted the job offer, and before I knew it, I was on my next career-building and life journey.

***A family radio station extraordinaire***

Before I officially started work, the assistant manager and I had breakfast at a local restaurant. He was so nice and made me feel welcome and somewhat less nervous about my new job and hometown.

Arctic Radio, the company that runs the radio station in The Pas and two other stations in the province (Flin Flon and Thompson), is family run and they really do treat you like family. The outgoing news director started training me immediately, showing step-by-step how the news runs. On the first day, he gave me his contact list and introduced me to the Mayor.

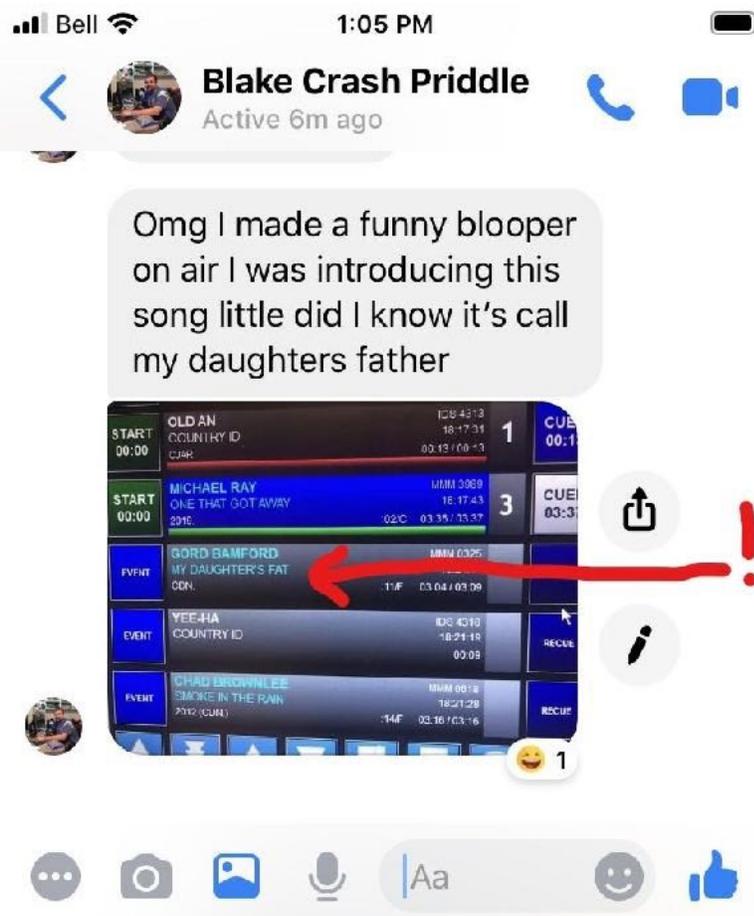
I could go on about how positive my experience has been. A few highlights include interviewing MP Niki Ashton and Premier Brian Pallister, covering The Pas' minor hockey team winning the Chevrolet Good Deeds Cup, and reporting on Northern Manitoba's Trappers Festival. I continue to learn skills that are helping me improve my reporting.

At our station, everyone pitches in, even if it means working outside their position. I have been given ideas for news stories from my colleagues to use almost every day. I don't always use them, but it's great that I have people willing to contribute. In return, I help them with sales/contest ideas, commercial voicing and production. I also fill in and do voice tracking if someone

Is sick and show initiative without being asked. Not only does this company treat people like family, but they are also more than happy to help their employees overcome problems they may have to ensure we do our jobs better. My employer provided me with a checklist to follow before sending the news each day to ensure that the spelling and numbers were accurate.

Like most workplaces, I receive constructive criticism and positive feedback to make me a better news reporter and radio personality. This includes remembering how to talk with a conversational voice on-air and adding voice clips to news stories. The best feedback I received was being told by my employer that the news is the best it's been in a long time since I started working there. These kind words make me feel proud and successful. When anyone makes a mistake on the air, we simply apologize and fix it, or just laugh if it is harmless!

**Figure 5**  
*Gord Bamford's Daughter is not fat LOL*



[Photo of a funny blooper I made on air. I was introducing a song titled "My daughters father" however the last few letters cut and the broadcast displayed "My daughters fat"]

You may be wondering if I have told my employer I am autistic...Yes, I have disclosed my autism and the challenges I have. What I have also provided is what works for me to do a good job. Our Morning Wake Up host even interviewed me to promote World Autism Awareness Day. After all, awareness leads to understanding and inclusion.

### Lesson 9: I Keep on Working (at Life!)

During the COVID 19 pandemic, many have had it tough worrying about jobs, illness and dying. The work I have done on the radio, keeping people informed about the latest pandemic developments, has given me the feeling that I am contributing to society during such a difficult time. Dad tells me not to look at this crisis as a sprint but more like a marathon. There is so much that I haven't done yet, so much that I still want to do, and I look forward to the next chapter of my life. I always look and think ahead and forget about the negatives from the past whenever I can.

I would never trade my autism for anything, although I will gladly trade my OCD and anxiety for a cold beer any day. I am lucky to have a family that supports me every step of the way and friends and work colleagues to help.

Things are better than they were 20-25 years ago, but we can do better. It is becoming increasingly common for autistics to wear headphones in noisy environments, and stimming is becoming more acceptable. Today when people expect me to look at them, I just tell them I am sorry, but I am uncomfortable making direct eye contact and that it has nothing to do with them. Society has made mistakes in the way it treats those "who are different", but we have the power to change the future and create inclusive schools, workplaces and communities.

This is Blake "Crash" Priddle signing off for now. Stay tuned for my memoir: **Good Morning Blake: Growing Up Autistic and Being Okay** available now.

### Figure 6

At my Arctic Radio news desk



[A photo of me smiling, currently working at my Arctic Radio news desk]

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