

## A Very Special Person

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Today I would like to share a story about someone very close to me who has been a big impact in my life. I am talking about my big brother Yuichi.

Yuichi is autistic and is the most caring person I have ever known, but his autism means he finds it hard to control his emotions. He will never be the smartest person, nor a sporting star, but he has the kindest heart and unconditionally loves the people closest to him.

Autism is a condition that is caused by abnormalities in the structure or chemicals of the brain. People with autism will generally have developmental issues, find it hard to control their emotions and have difficulty interacting with people in social situations. Undiagnosed autistic children are often seen to be “Problem” children with behavioural issues. In Yuichi’s case, he was non-verbal until around 12 years of age and has a tendency to show extremes of emotion. When he is happy, it is like he is the happiest person in the world, but when he is upset or anxious, he can be very scary and can lash out unexpectedly. One time Yuichi even put our Mother in the hospital with 5 broken ribs after a particularly violent episode. Although she was severely injured, she has never been angry about it, instead she understands that it is not his fault because he is unable to control his emotions. He does not mean to hurt anyone.

Yuichi has had to endure verbal and physical abuse since he was very young and actually bares scars on his arms and legs from cigarette burns inflicted by people who were supposed to be caring for him. I can only assume that this happened because he appears to be different and perceived to be mentally challenged, or simply because people don’t understand autism.

It is easy to assume that Yuichi does not understand a lot of what is happening around him, but I can assure you that he understands everything. Yuichi often surprises us with how much he remembers, particularly with places he has visited. We returned to Japan from Thailand 5 years ago, after being away for more than 10 years, and Yuichi remembered how to get to our old house. On another occasion, he even remembered how to get to a Toy Store he visited only once when he was 4 years old.

Autistic people emulate the emotions of the people and environment around them. When people approach with a smile, speak calmly and are gentle, more often than not the autistic person will adopt the same calmness. If people are aggressive, speak harshly

or show an angry expression on their face, the autistic person is likely to become very anxious or upset.

There was a time when Yuichi was anxious and began to panic when we were out in public. In his panic, he approached a stranger and grabbed him by the hand, as if to ask for help, but that person pulled his hand away angrily, looking confrontational. We explained that Yuichi was autistic, but the man did not change his actions, making Yuichi even more anxious.

I understand that the stranger probably didn't know anything about autism, so I can't blame him for his actions and do not expect him to understand how it affected Yuichi's state of mind.

But in contrast just a few moments later, my brother did exactly the same thing to another man who appeared to understand that Yuichi was distressed. After we again explained that he is autistic, the man reacted very calmly, with a smile and gentle touch of Yuichi's hand which almost immediately calmed him down.

To the average person without any experience dealing with autistic people, I can understand that being confronted with a situation like this can be very scary. My advice to you, if you find yourself in this situation, would be to simply offer a smile, do not stare and just walk away calmly. This will help to calm the situation.

I have talked about many negative aspects of my brother's condition today, but I can assure you that the majority of the time our family experiences boundless happiness with him, sharing lots of love and laughter. If I am able to prevent just one negative experience for my brother by speaking here today, I will have been able to return just a fraction of the love that he has given to me.