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# What is it like to have Tourette's Syndrome when you're a teenager?

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## Imagine being diagnosed with a life-changing condition while you're a student in Year 11.

Now imagine the symptoms showing during a mock GCSE exam. That's exactly what happened to Georgia when she first developed Tourette's Syndrome.

The neurological condition causes involuntary sounds and movements, known as tics, that can be debilitating when they hit. As 18-year-old Georgia told BBC Bitesize, there was absolutely nothing to suggest beforehand that she had it. It was only when her arm started to twitch so much it was affecting her concentration in the exam that she knew something was wrong. Twelve months later, she was diagnosed with Tourette's.

"As Tourette's was a new entity, I wasn't aware of my triggers," Georgia recalls. Triggers are the situations that can cause tics, and they include stress, excitement or even an allergy. "I didn't have the strategies [to deal with them] I have now," she adds.

"[Now] my Tourette's is all-encompassing on a daily basis. My tics are heavily context-based; however, I do spout out random words like 'salmonella'."

The condition is often associated with involuntary swearing, but this only happens with around 10% of people affected. Georgia explains that, while she does have some swearing tics, they're mostly suppressible.



Georgia, right, was in the middle of her mock GCSE exams when she showed signs of Tourette's Syndrome.

## Tourette's and tics

Tics can be physical and vocal. They include eye rolling, blinking, grimacing, saying random words and phrases and, occasionally, swearing. Tics do not have any lasting damage, although any which involve physical jerks and twitches can be painful.

The nature of the different tics means they can draw attention to who has them, something Georgia quickly became aware of. But for her, it was never a situation which led to name-calling or bullying.

She says: "Everyone had to adapt very quickly. Because of this, I got quite a lot of attention, mostly because I was the new class clown and my tics were like a vending machine of jokes. It definitely eased the tension of what was a stressful exam period."



Georgia was able to get special consideration during her exams (picture posed by models).

## How humour can help

Georgia's tics can cause her muscles to tense up so much that the best option to remain mobile is to use a wheelchair.

She explains: "In addition to my muscles tensing, I can have the urge to collapse, in a kind of controlled fall. I can be stuck either way from two minutes to up to three hours.

"Also, if I have a lot of head tics, I lose balance and my spatial awareness goes out the window. If these tics become too overwhelming, it's a lot easier and much more dignified to use a chair.

“As I have a disability, people can become nervous around me. My tics are often funny, deadpan, sometimes laugh out loud hilarious so I find giving those around me permission to laugh. There's an obvious line of respect and, in my experience, that's been met.”

## Moving on to A level

Once in sixth form, lessons became tougher for Georgia, as Tourette's affected her ability to concentrate and she would often interrupt the teacher.

People with Tourette's can anticipate a tic in the same way, for example, someone knows when they are about to sneeze, so the topics taught in each lesson would not sink in if Georgia became aware of a possible tic.

When that happened, she had to rely on the content being emailed to her afterwards, or friends updating her with notes they could see she was unable to take.



Class presentations were another area where Georgia trained herself to contribute (picture posed by models).

“I was frustrated,” she remembers, “especially as I had lots of ideas to contribute. Whenever a lesson had a debate question, one of my teachers would send me a pre-lesson plan so I could prepare some points. This meant I could just focus physically on saying words, rather than being overwhelmed by thinking what to say also.”



“One time in Year 12, I got really upset I wasn't able to give a presentation I worked so hard on. By Year 13, I was able to give a five-minute presentation. I was immensely proud of myself.”

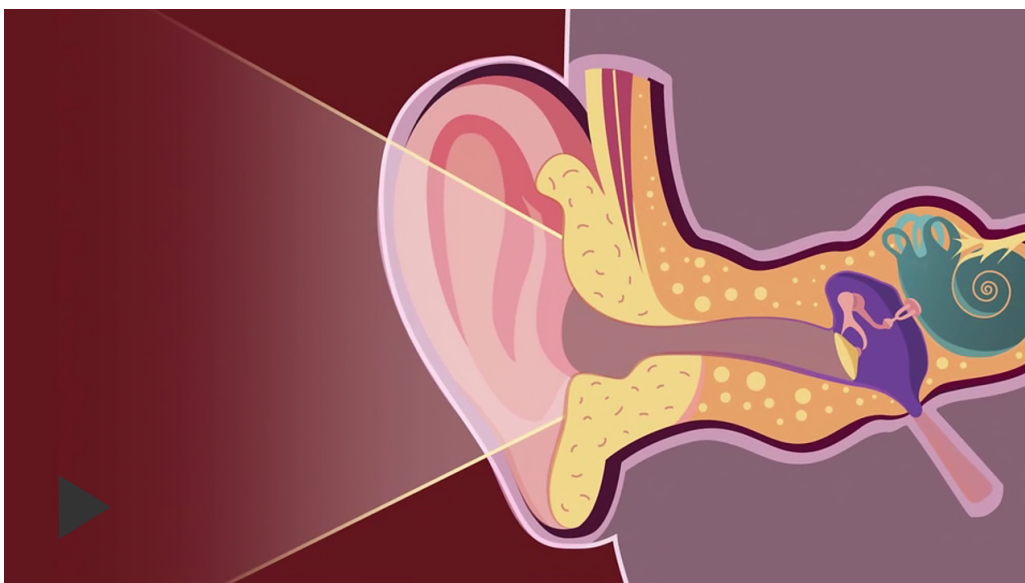
## 'You are entitled to the help you deserve'

Georgia's advice to other teenagers who have Tourette's during exam time is to communicate with their school and college as much as possible. She was able to work out plans with both her GCSE and A Level teachers, so she could have extra time in the exam and her own room to take rest breaks. In one exam, when tics prevented her writing anything down at all, she was given special consideration and still came out the other side with the grades to secure a university place.

Georgia says: “It took a while for me to be confident to walk out of a classroom or ask teachers for extra help. It's their job and you are entitled to the help you deserve.

“It may take you longer to get schoolwork done compared to the average Joe, but don't work yourself to the ground! After all, you'll not remember what mark you got in that mock exam as opposed to that night you went out with your mates!”

**For any help and advice regarding Tourette's Syndrome, visit the [Tourette's Action website](#) . The NHS guide to Tourette's Syndrome can be found [here](#) .**



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