Centre for ADHD & Autism Support

Why is it important for some people to explore an autism diagnosis as an adult?

This is written by a neurodiverse team in the UK, based on their understanding of the importance of exploring an autism diagnosis, as an adult.

Sense of self

Many autistic people go through huge parts of their life knowing they are different, knowing they find things more difficult than other people, and feeling out of place or "wrong". That feeling of not fitting in and trying to live up to society's idea of "normal" is emotionally draining. In gaining a diagnosis, many autistic adults feel a sense of relief and acceptance of themselves.

By learning about themselves, autistic people can gain an understanding of their behaviours and their needs. If autistic people are aware of what their differences are and what can be put in place to support these differences, they can make adjustments which can lead to success.

Autism and mental well-being

Having an understanding of how the autistic mind works, and how one's own mind works as an autistic person, is critical for ensuring positive mental well-being. Some people are misdiagnosed with mental health conditions. They are often provided with treatment which may be ineffective, due to their neurodiversity. For autistic people depression, anxiety, and obsessive behaviours can be symptoms of autism, rather than a stand-alone condition.

Treatment for mental health difficulties are often designed for neurotypical people. Some therapeutic styles may not be appropriate for autistic people, if their differences aren't taken into account.

Coping strategies - specific for autistic people

Sensory adjustments, allowing for additional processing time, and recharging to avoid burnout are strategies that may not work for neurotypical people, but would be life changing for autistic people. A diagnosis can be helpful to point the autistic person in the right direction to explore these coping strategies, approach services, and learn from autistic peers.

Learning these coping strategies, and how to manage autistic differences, can lead to better life choices and decisions. Autistic people who have been diagnosed as adults have said that they feel more able to say "no" to things that are outside of their comfort zone, which has reduced stress and improved mental well-being.

"Finding your tribe" and relationships

Socialising, contrary to popular myth, is often incredibly important for autistic people - but communication and social understanding differences can make this a difficult thing to do. Autistic people can sometimes find it more straight forward to make and maintain relationships with other neurodiverse people. Having a diagnosis can open up opportunities to autistic social groups, as well as giving the autistic person "permission" in their own head to seek out other people who are like them.

Feeling empowered to let people know about a diagnosis, and what that means in terms of an individual's differences, can support stronger relationships. Coming from a place of honesty creates a solid foundation- and can allow autistic people to be free of "masking" their differences, which can lead to exhaustion, burn out, and harm to mental well-being.

Giving yourself a break

Many autistic people who were diagnosed in adulthood have expressed their relief at finally being able to give themselves a break and "forgive" their past differences and aspects of their lives that they have found difficult. Once diagnosed, they may feel able to make allowances, be kinder to themselves, and feel validated.

Access to appropriate interventions and services

- Employment - Under the Equality Act 2010, autistic people have additional rights under the "protected characteristics" legislation. Employers must put into place reasonable adjustments to ensure autistic people can access work and undertake their work in an equal way to their colleagues. Reasonable adjustments can be lifechanging for autistic people and open new work opportunities that would not be possible without support or adaptations.

- Services - Some organisations offer standalone services for autistic adults, such as social groups, 1:1 functional support, and employment support. Others offer services that can be adapted for autistic people. Whether statutory, voluntary, or private, organisations have a responsibility to make their services accessible.

- Benefits - Although being autistic won't automatically qualify you for benefits, some benefits can be incredibly helpful. An autism diagnosis, as well as a letter from a professional, detailing the individual's difficulties, can go a long way to supporting a benefits claim.

Why not self-identify?

Although autistic people don't need an official diagnosis to self-believe or self-identify, the nature of autism is that people can be very literal, honest, and rule driven. Therefore, if someone isn't "officially autistic" they may feel that they are not allowed to call themselves autistic, might not want to be unfair to others who have a diagnosis, or not feel validated.

Also, by gaining an official diagnosis, autistic people are able to access services they would not be entitled to if they self-identify- such as social groups, statutory services for autistic people, and benefits.

Should I share my diagnosis?

Once someone has gained a diagnosis, they don't have to disclose this to others.

The exception to this, in the UK, is the DLVA. You must tell DVLA if your autistic spectrum condition (ASC) affects your ability to drive safely. This includes Asperger's syndrome. https://www.gov.uk/asc-and-driving. However, autism alone is unlikely to affect your ability to drive, and the majority of people will not need to inform the DVLA.

Disclosing a diagnosis can be beneficial at work or in education, as you may be entitled to reasonable adjustments. You are not legally obliged to let your school, college, or university know.

This is a version of why a diagnosis can be beneficial, based on our understanding in November 2023. In a few years' time we understand that this may no longer be relevant information, as things change.