

I am autistic, this means I see the world, process thoughts and actions and make my way through it in a very different way. At times, this can make typical interactions more difficult for me and at others, I will excel – particularly if a subject encounters a special interest of mine where I can be incredibly detail focussed.

I was unfortunate enough to not find out I was autistic until my 30's, which meant I grew up with an 'alphabet soup' of mental health diagnosis to try and explain away why I felt different, that I didn't belong and could not fit in. Finding out I was autistic was one of the best things to help me embrace my differences and realise it was okay not to be like the people around me, our different processing systems just meant we were different. Not less than.

I am autistic, yet many who know me and work alongside me do not know this. I only disclose this to people I trust or those who it is necessary to know that I process the world differently. The reason many people don't know I'm autistic is due to "masking", which is not something I do consciously but it is indeed exhausting. I spend the majority of my working day trying to appear neurotypical, which means I'm always being very self-aware and self-critical. This is such a shame for those around me in a way, as they don't get to see me become over excited/happy and stim away. Oh yes, in the comfort of my own home or around my close friends I'm known as a "happy flapper".

Unfortunately there remains a stereotype still associated with being autistic. I'm not like rain man, I'm terrible at maths, I can't make eye contact (for short amounts of time) and I don't get/make jokes. (Although it's still important to remember autistic people vary as much as neurotypical people, in that we'll all have different skills and areas of need.) I've completed levels of education at NVQ then graduated from university. My role in work is very important and I need the trust of the professionals and families around me, which are often unfortunately impacted just by looking a bit younger – let alone if they knew I was autistic!

Working from home in this sense has been helpful in reducing the need to mask, my computer is surrounded with twiddles, stim toys, squashy items and textures to help me stay regulated. I don't think by any means that I'm the only one sat in a zoom meeting stroking a mermaid sequin cushion though...am I?

It was important for me to tell my close colleagues and line manager, as often there was an expectation I would read between the lines to what was expected of me. Given that this is not something I find easy to do, I advised them my brain worked a little differently and if they wanted me to achieve something they'd need to be a little bit more explicit. Likewise, I will always question something if I don't feel I have understood an area, or ask the person to try and say it in a different way.

As professionals it is our job to ensure we can pass information effectively to others, we explain any jargon used that cannot be avoided. If someone queries the meaning of what is being said and it is not explained in a more accessible way – the problem lies with the speaker.

My Neurodiversity means I find it a lot easier to think outside the box and question 'why' something has to happen the way it does if it isn't working efficiently and how we can work together to improve it.

I work in a wonderful position supporting children and young people who attend specialist provision schools, I come from a first-hand understanding of sensory processing difficulties, and what it really means to be autistic, that could be impacting and why certain strategies might not be working and what to try instead.

The methods professionals have previously been taught to identify, diagnose and support autism are often out dated and ineffective. Those who display “atypical” aspects of autism (e.g. not hand flapping and making eye contact) are hugely under diagnosed and grow up with, often severe, mental health difficulties and depression. Receiving a multitude of different diagnosis, often until their own children are diagnosed autistic do they begin to understand the reason they have felt so different all along. In order to reduce this trend or late support we need to disregard the idea that we need to flap and avoid eye contact to even be considered for a referral. We need to learn from the real experts of the subject, and they are autistic advocates. There are many social media pages, such as “Ask Autistic Adults – Resource for Parents of Autistics”. You should make sure to read the rules on these page and not using person first language – the autistic community trend comments that if you need reminding we’re a person first (person with autism) then that’s the real issue.

There’s gaming groups for autistic children and young people who like Minecraft and Fortnite (Spectrum Gaming)

There’s many Autistic Advocates and resources written by autistic people

There’s one other thing everyone should be aware of...Once you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.