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Experiences of ageing in adults with autism spectrum disorder

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Our research set out to explore ageing in individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). However, we soon discovered that individuals in their 50s were often newly diagnosed, and they had lived their lives unaware of their condition. The research set out to document the experiences of these individuals looking at their personal histories and their experiences of receiving a life changing diagnosis in middle age. Our first paper explores the impact of receiving a diagnosis and its potential benefits. All of the participants had come to see themselves as 'bad', 'evil' or 'alien'. They had struggled in a world which sought to marginalise and avoid them. In childhood and later at work, they were viewed as odd, pedantic and rude. The participants had all been treated for mental health issues, and in particular anxiety and depression, but their specific ASD symptoms had been missed. Receiving a diagnosis was experienced as a 'eureka' moment, and allowed the participants to reconstruct their biographies and reevaluate their earlier selves. Sarah now keeps an emotion diary and meticulously finds labels for the previously unidentified states she experienced. As feelings gain substance, she works back through her life identifying the emotions felt in past joys, sorrows and happiness. Mark has become an advocate for children with learning disabilities using his obsession with the detail of law to fight for justice. While receiving a diagnosis later in life is generally a positive experience, state care and support was reported as lacking or non-existent. Older adults with ASD have been a neglected area of research, and our work suggests that there remain many people who are entering old age without having received a diagnosis. Our work suggests ways in which GPs and Psychiatrists can help identify undiagnosed ASD in old age, and marks the start of further projects examining the support older adults with ASD need later in life.

#### Conferences

Stagg, S.D., and Belcher, H. (2016). Receiving a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder after the age of 50. *Presented at British Psychological Society Annual Conference, April 2016, Nottingham, UK.*

Stagg, S.D., and Belcher, H. (2016). Receiving a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder after the age of 50. *Presented at International Meeting for Autism Research, May 2016, Baltimore, USA.*

Stagg, S.D., and Belcher, H. (Submitted). Receiving an Autism Spectrum Diagnosis in Middle Age. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders.*