The benefits of an autism diagnosis

Dr James Cusack, Research Director of Autistica

As a 12 year old, I was told that I was different because I had autism. This news transformed my life.

Autism typically becomes detectable around the age of three and I was no exception. Various reports were compiled confirming my parents’ suspicions that my development was atypical, noting a lack of speech, a lack of interest in others, and odd routines.

The next nine years leading up to my eventual diagnosis were a struggle. I was bullied, I would misbehave in class, and I became increasingly sad and anxious, with the outside world seeming increasingly confusing to me. The prognosis seemed to be a lifetime of constant support, and missing out on things which we all take for granted: an education, a career, a social network, my own family. I still have a copy of a report from a psychiatrist which states that “James, in a rather logical manner, outlined why his life was not worth living”.

I’m 30 now, and a few years back, I earned my PhD in autism. I’m married (coincidentally to a GP), with a daughter and a dog called Molly. I enjoy an active social life, mainly with my local running club or travelling north to watch Aberdeen Football Club. Life is fantastically average.

I tell you about my life now because, whilst the news was initially hard to digest, I believe that my diagnosis by a clinical psychologist dramatically improved my developmental trajectory and the quality of life for me and my family.

Understanding that I was fundamentally different, stopped me or my parents blaming ourselves, wondering why our hard work was not paying off.

With the diagnosis my anxiety levels began to drop. As the psychiatrist astutely observed, I am a thoroughly logical person, and have been able to use that quality to develop strategies to manage my life. I attended a base set within a mainstream school that helped me alleviate some of the challenges I faced. My family and school put in place specific accommodations to remove daily hurdles which could slow me down. That meant I was able to do things that you would take for granted. I could walk down a corridor, enter a classroom, concentrate in lessons, make friends and participate in society.

I’m now the research director at an autism research charity called Autistica. Through my work I am acutely aware that many people with autism still face unacceptable outcomes including low quality of life, social exclusion and poor access to employment. Most shockingly, a report which we recently published shows that the average age of death for autistic people is 16 years lower than the general population.

Research funded by Autistica shows that families are still waiting an avoidably long amount of time to get a diagnosis, with the average age of diagnosis (55 months in children) remaining unchanged over 10 years. This has to change. For me, and for most people with autism, diagnosis is the first step to understanding yourself and being understood. It’s the first step to accessing the help you need. And, most importantly, for me, it was the first step to being able to live the life I wanted to lead.