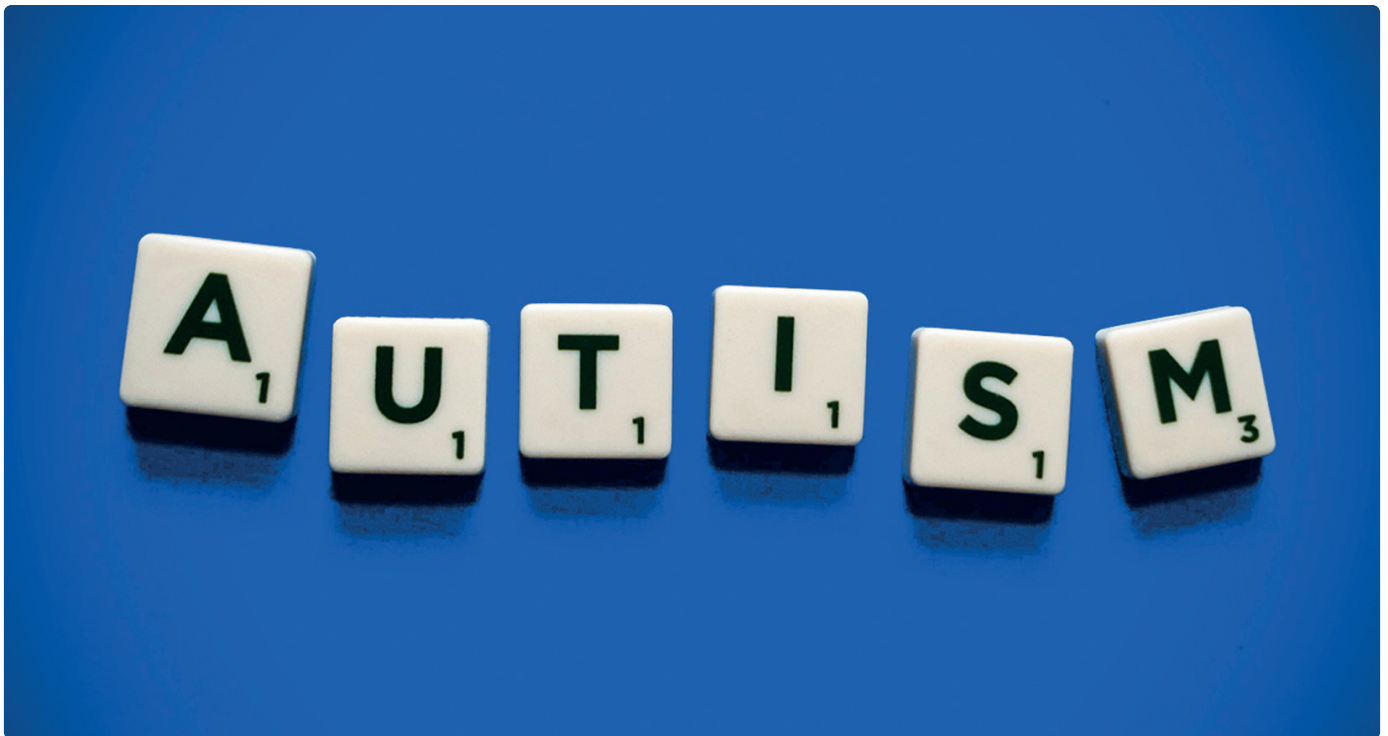


Why autism is sometimes diagnosed late



There is no blood test for autism.

As a development condition, it is usually diagnosed in early childhood, as those caring for a child notice difficulty with talking or interacting with others. Then a professional can provide a diagnosis and help design a system of care that works in the child's best interest.

But some signs of autism can remain latent in these early years and become more noticeable in adolescence or early adulthood. Sometimes a transition – such as into a new school or workplace – is where these problems arise. As an employer you should be ready to spot these signs of stress and, if necessary, look to help an employee get a diagnosis.

Why a diagnosis will help

As there is no blood test for autism, there is also no “cure”. Indeed, situating autism as a condition to be cured, rather than a different way of approaching the world, is itself problematic, and will rightly offend many autistic people.

But a diagnosis is still a powerful and useful thing, especially for those whose autism may be causing them to struggle with work or life.

A diagnosis will let an autistic person understand and explain to themselves and others why they act differently. It can give hope to an individual, opening up treatment paths if they wish to take them and other interventions. It can also help reduce stigma – allowing the individual to explicitly explain why they are different. And it allows those with autism to connect to others on the spectrum, should they wish to.

When autism is diagnosed later however, the individual may struggle more to accept their diagnosis as they haven't had years of support to understand what it means. It can also trigger feelings of loss and sadness for the years they struggled with autism without a name for it.

Why some diagnoses happen late

Autism is on a spectrum – no two individuals experience it in the exact same way.

That means some signs that are easy to spot in some infants with autism might not be present for others.

But life becomes more and more complex as one gets older. Times of transition can be particularly demanding such as starting secondary school, university or a new job, and at these times, social and behavioural differences can become more obvious as the individual responds to the social and educational challenges of school, work and friendships.

Those who are diagnosed later have often had good academic results but started to struggle as they reached adolescence or adulthood as the social world and its “rules” became far more complex. Women are more likely to be diagnosed later than men, as they tend to be better at compensating for social difficulties. High intelligence and good language skills in general may have allowed an autistic person to compensate well for any issues throughout childhood, but they may face new challenges in adulthood.

Continues overleaf...

What to look out for

Those who are diagnosed later in life will not all be the same. But there are several characteristics to look out for:

- Problems forming friendships, or perhaps a preference to form friendships online
- Trouble with time management
- Expressed feelings of “not fitting in”
- Social withdrawal and isolation from
- Being easily overwhelmed by sensory input or crowded places
- Difficulty expressing emotions
- Academic challenges in areas of abstract thinking

These characteristics might be spotted by line managers or colleagues or expressed by an employee themselves. This is obviously a delicate area, but not one you should simply ignore as an employer.



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