A fact sheet about

Relationships after a late assessment

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Relationships after a late assessment

How a late assessment can change your relationships, and one way to share it.



Key points

- Being assessed as autistic, ADHD or both as an adult (definition below) often changes how you see your past and yourself, and so can self-identifying as neurodivergent.
- Many people then mask less and ask for more of what they need, and the people around them feel that change too.
- Some friction while everyone adjusts is common, and it is not a sign that something went wrong.
- Telling one person one thing that is changing, and one thing that is staying the same, may make the change easier to share.

What a late assessment is, and how it changes the way you see yourself

Since your assessment or self-identification you have started leaving family lunches earlier, and you have stopped forcing eye contact. A parent says you were never like this before. You feel more like yourself than you have in years, and yet some people seem less sure about it.

A late assessment means being assessed as autistic, ADHD or both as an adult, not as a child. Neurodivergent means thinking, learning, sensing or relating to the world in ways that diverge from socially constructed norms Everyone can self-identify as neurodivergent, with or without an assessment. Some see themselves as neurodivergent first and seek a specific assessment under the Neurodivergent Umbrella later, and some never do. This page talks mostly about assessment, because that is what the research looked at. If you self-identify, you may notice many of the same changes.

Many adults then look back on their lives with new eyes: school, friendships that ended, etc. Autistic and ADHD adults who found out later say they came to feel more like their true selves. They were also often kinder to themselves, where before they had been hard on themselves.

Many say an assessment did not change who they are. It helped them make sense of themselves and accept themselves. Some feel grief about the years without knowing, and also relief and freedom. Both

can be true at once.

Why the people around you feel it too

When you understand yourself better, you may start to do some things in a new way. You may drop some of the mask, or say no to things that cost too much. You may ask for quiet, more notice or a change of plan. Each of these is a change for the people around you as well.

Autistic adults have said they can be themselves most easily when the other person meets them partway. So the change is not only yours to make, and it works best when both sides adjust. You can read more about how to unmask safely here.

In an Australian study, adults who were assessed as autistic later in life said help from family and friends mattered. But that help also put strain on how they got on at times, as everyone worked out what was needed. Time with other autistic people helped them feel they belonged and accept themselves.

Some people around you may doubt it, compare you with how you seemed before, or say that everyone is a bit like that. Many adults feel misunderstood like this after an assessment. It often comes from how little people know about neurodivergence. It does not come from anything you did. Other people may welcome the change, like a friend who says it all makes sense now.

Research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: tell one person one change

Pick one person close to you whom you feel safe with. Tell them two things:

- one thing that is changing for you, like "I'm going to leave parties earlier now"
- one thing that is staying the same, like "I still want to see you every week"

The second part shows them that they still matter to you, even as some things change. You can share it in the way that suits you: in person, in a message or in a letter. It may help to write it down first.

You do not need to explain your assessment or share any details unless you want to. For some people telling others is not safe. So who you tell is always your choice, and only where it feels safe.

Give people time, because a first reaction is not always the last one. You can keep a note in the Understanding Zoe app of who you told and how it went. Look back on it before you tell the next person.

This step comes from what adults who found out later in life say helped them. It is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Some bonds may change shape over time, and making room for who you really are is still okay.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether your assessment was years ago or last week. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you make sense of an assessment and what it means for the people close to you, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If you want to understand more about how you work, with or without an assessment, the Understanding Zoe Blueprint describes how you work across ten areas of life, with ideas to try.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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