

# The diagnosis of autism in females – what are the roles of mental health and wellbeing in diagnosis and the diagnostic journey?

## Throughout their diagnostic journey, females with autism experience high levels of exhaustion whilst searching for acceptance and understanding.

### Background

- Autistic females often present differently to males, which may mean their autism is diagnosed later in life or missed all together. [1].
- Autistic people are at greater risk of co-morbid mental health problems [2].
- This project intersected these two topics and explored the role of mental health and wellbeing during women's self-identification and autism diagnosis periods.

### Methods

- Qualitative design – a blog analysis using 20 blogs searched for and gathered through meta crawler.
- Participants – females over 13 years who self identify as having autism or have a diagnosis of autism and have written a blog in English about their experiences of the diagnostic journey.
- 19 participants disclosed a co-morbid mental health condition.
- Data analysis – thematic analysis [3].

*The relief and empowerment I felt when I was diagnosed and finally discovered what "was wrong with me" were overwhelming...It literally gave me a second life. [Blogger 5]*

*It felt like a slog, it felt exhausting to explain over and over again what me being autistic really meant... why I was different to the stereotypes but that didn't mean I was less autistic... [Blogger 2]*

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### Results

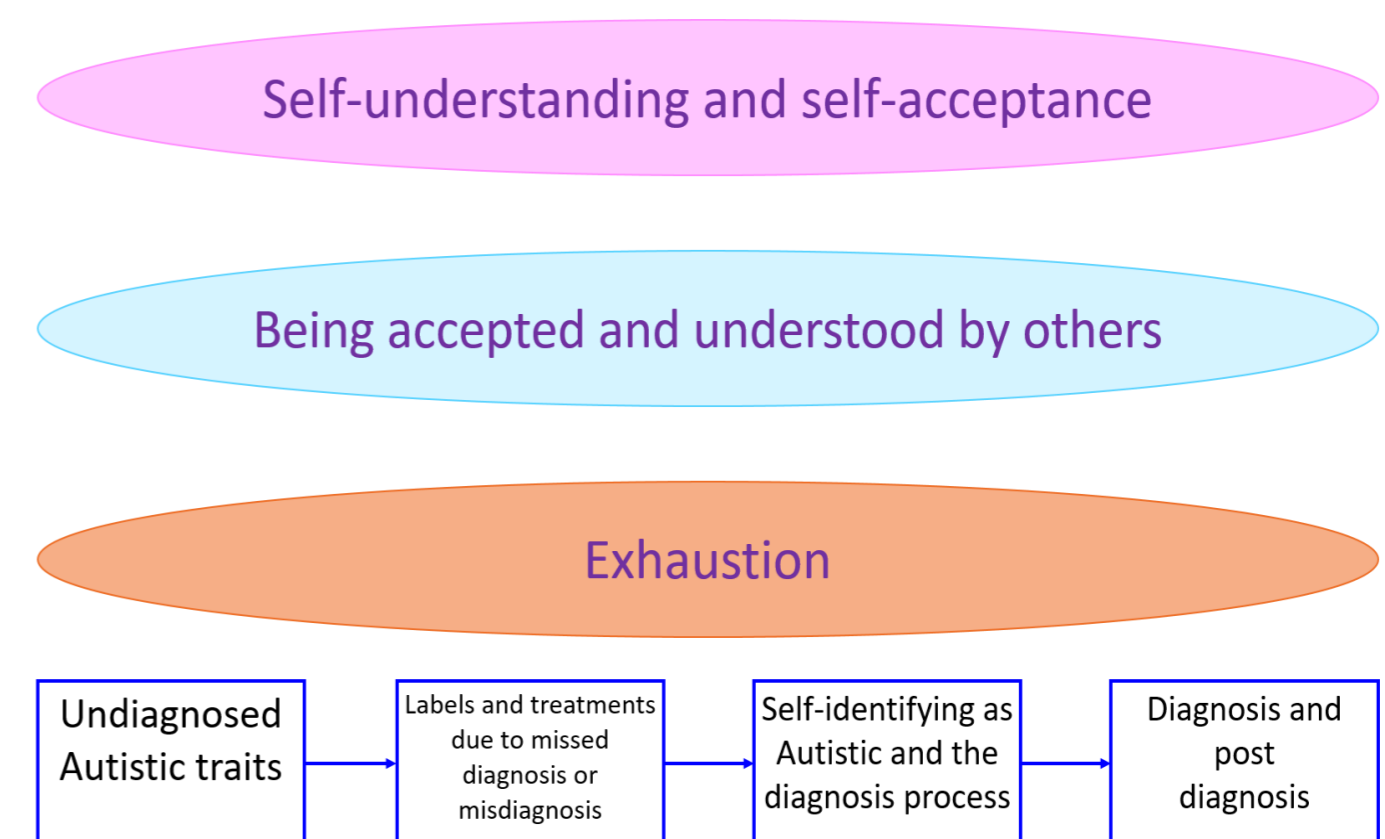


Figure 2: The linear diagnostic journey of females with autism, with the three reflexive themes above.

- A **diagnostic journey** was generated from bloggers experiences (Fig.2).
- **Three reflexive themes** were generated during analysis which are seen across all blogs and along the diagnostic journey.
- **Self-understanding and self-acceptance** –bloggers' experiences of wanting to understand themselves and where they fit in the world.
- **Being accepted and understood by others** – the bloggers' desire to have others acknowledge and accept them within society.
- **Exhaustion** – both physical and mental exhaustion are seen.
- Reports of **camouflaging** and **facing stereotypes of autism** were seen across all themes.

### Conclusions

- Our analysis highlighted that autistic women struggle with self-understanding and self-acceptance and feeling accepted and understood by others at all points, from being undiagnosed, recognising their own autism, during diagnosis and post-diagnosis.

### References:

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2. Sedgewick, F., Leppanen, J., & Tchanturia, K. (2020). Gender differences in mental health prevalence in autism. *Advances in Autism*.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.