

A is for autistic

Meet three autistic women who are making a difference

In 1956 Susie Wing was diagnosed with autism at three years old. Susie's diagnosis became the catalyst for her mother, psychiatrist Lorna Wing and colleague Dr Judith Gould, to emerge as pioneers and heroes in autism research. Lorna and Judith's work was instrumental in describing autism as a spectrum and challenged the entrenched notion that autism only affected men and boys.

Susie died at 49 due to a heart attack. The effects of the menopause had influenced her autism leading her to consume excessive fluids, ultimately diluting her blood.

Today, through their legacy, autism in women and girls is more widely recognised but it is still being overlooked in women. We speak to three autistic women about their experiences and the contributions they are making to improve the lives of others.

...sometimes it stands in my way, whether I want it to or not

Holly Conley-Reid, 33, midwife

They're definitely on the spectrum' is a casual phrase that midwife Holly Conley-Reid finds hurtful. Not just the words themselves but the negative casual tone in which they're said.

"It's used when people find other people a bit weird or strange but that doesn't mean they're autistic," explains Holly, 33 who was diagnosed with autism during her midwifery degree at Northumbria University in 2022.

Autism Spectrum Disorder, to use its clinical name, is a lifelong and genetic condition that causes differences in communication, social interaction, behaviour and sensory experiences. According to the National Autistic Society the 'spectrum' represents the unique set of challenges and strengths of autistic people; it is not intended to be used as a scale of someone's capability.

Holly is now a busy hybrid midwife, managing an antenatal clinic, conducting community visits, and regularly working shifts on the maternity ward.

Deciding to be a midwife was a 'light bulb' moment. From three years old she remembers caring for her father who spent lengthy spells in hospital. Holly sees midwifery as a profound honour, allowing her to witness one of the most transformative moments in a woman's life.

"I do have a bit of 'saviour syndrome', I think this is where the my own autism comes into play. If I know someone needs help I really will put myself out and I won't even think twice about it, which can sometimes land me in hot water," says Holly.

Her autism shows up in other ways including her thoroughness and attention to detail. "I'm quite perceptive at picking up if someone's struggling or needs help. Or I need to adjust to their needs. I think it is a common misconception that autistic people lack empathy or can't communicate it," she says.

Holly tries not to let her autism get in the way of life but 'sometimes it stands in my way, whether I want it to or not,' she says.

During the first year of her midwifery degree Holly noticed she found it difficult to concentrate when surrounded by people in lectures. She confided in a friend who said she reminded her of her autistic sister. Holly's diagnosis came towards the end of her degree as sadly so did her breakdown.



For Holly relaxing is being with the people she loves and animals

Being so close to the end of her course Holly was determined to finish. 'Basically I just had to struggle on,' she says.

"I wish the waiting list for diagnosis, wasn't so long, if it was shorter people would get help in a more timely manner and the special working requirements they are entitled to," says Holly.

Holly now mentors other student midwives, she is keen to prevent what happened to her from happening to anyone else.

When asked if Holly has plans to start a family of her own she says, "I'm very on the fence about it. Midwifery certainly didn't put me off. It sounds strange but I would like to give labour a go myself

and see how I cope with it. On the other hand, it may seem selfish but I wouldn't want to break my routine for a child. There would be new kinds of challenges such as the changes in my body and unknown stuff that would come with it. I don't know how well I would cope with it and my partner has ADHD. Having a child could be to the level where we can manage to get through society quite well or we could have a nonverbal child that would need round the clock care. That level of unknown just makes you think."

'it is a common misconception that autistic people lack empathy'

... no one should be afraid of us or thinking we are inferior

Alex Morgan, 61, writer and creator of The Autistic Woman website

Alex Morgan declares, "I have always been an absolute Olympic level masker." Alex, 61, is creator and writer of the website The Autistic Woman.

Masking is the term used to describe the social mimicry that autistic women unconsciously use.

"I really try hard not to do it now because I think it's so damaging and exhausting. For decades, I wasn't really aware of what I was doing, except I knew that something wasn't right and something didn't feel authentic anymore," says Alex, 61.

Alex scored 39 out of 50. "I was just stunned because it never crossed my mind in any shape or form that I could be autistic. If someone had said that to me, I would have just laughed in their face. There was just no way."

After receiving a letter saying it could take two years for her to receive an official diagnosis Alex opted for the 'Right to Choose' pathway available to NHS patients living in England. She was officially diagnosed a couple of months later via an appointment with a psychiatrist.

Waiting lists for diagnosis of neurodivergent conditions have increased significantly compared to pre-pandemic levels.

According to NHS England in March 2025 there were around 11,000 people with a new referral for suspected autism compared to just over 4,000 in May 2019.

Through The Autistic Woman website Alex supports other women in obtaining their neurodivergent diagnosis. "I'm still hearing 'but you're married. You can't be autistic. You're making eye contact. You can't be autistic. You're expressing your feelings. You can't be autistic. You're articulate. You can't be autistic,'" says Alex.

She is frustrated that women are still told by healthcare professionals they are suffering from mental health conditions such as anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder. "It's just awful how women get diagnosed with the wrong stuff, get given drugs and take them for years and think why am I not feeling any better?"

Alex is also on a mission to educate the wider neurotypical world. "It's not autism itself that disables us. That's just a difference. It is the society that is so bright and noisy and competitive and expects things to be done in a certain way and dislikes difference."

She worries that sometimes there is an element of fear of autistic people due to a lack of experience and understanding. "We have different brains, but everybody in society has a different brain.

We're just part of that huge continuum of difference. No one should be afraid of us or thinking that we're inferior. We're not broken. We're not damaged. We're fine!"



To relax Alex likes to be near water

Alex has been a journalist for 40 years which in her view was a bad career choice for her 'kind of brain'.

"I don't know how I managed it. I hated absolutely every day of my career. I was either bored to death or nearly stressed to death!"

During the boredom of lockdown and out of curiosity Alex completed the AQ50 questionnaire online. The AQ50 test is a screening tool with different versions designed for adults, children and those under five. The questionnaire is made up of 50 statements with four answer options ranging from 'definitely agree' to 'definitely disagree'. The threshold score is 26 with most non-autistic women scoring an average of 15.

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....I just thought life was just extremely hard

Amanda Skytrek, 46, founder of The Neurodivergent Living Room

Amanda Scrytek lives in a 'low demand' household. The mother of two autistic daughters was prompted to seek her own autism diagnosis after her youngest daughter had a breakdown and autistic burnout in 2019.

Amanda, 46 says looking back she began to sense her autism at university. She found it difficult to be around lots of people. "I'd always felt different. I didn't really know what it was. I couldn't put my finger on it. I knew that there was something different about the way I process things. The GP told me I had generalised anxiety disorder. I just thought life was extremely hard."

The birth of Amanda's oldest daughter was traumatic due to complications during a caesarean section. She lost a lot of her hair shortly afterwards and found it difficult to bond with her baby girl. The complexity of the birth meant she felt unable to disentangle her autism from this experience. 'It just wasn't on my radar then,' Amanda says.

Watching her daughter recover from burnout enabled Amanda to recognise her own autistic traits. "I really identified with the same things. I was just thinking that's me as well."

It was during this time Amanda found her tribe – the parents who have watched their children go through similar experiences.

"There is nobody or organization that could have ever replicated what they were able to support me with," says Amanda who recommends parents of autistic children seek out social media groups for support. "The groups will save your life. People refer to it as a village. It is the ultimate village. You can log on at any time of day and night, and somebody will be up. People have got so much grace and patience for each other. It's quite astounding really."

Recognising there were limited social opportunities for her 18 year old daughter Amanda set up a women's group in November 2024. The Neurodivergent Women's Living Room tries to recreate a Friday night out in a church hall twice a month. Amanda says she wanted somewhere that wasn't full of drunk people or didn't cost a lot of money.

"It is two hours of peace and nobody telling you what to do. There is always something arty based to draw your attention and keep your hands busy," she says. "Otherwise women come to our group and then sit in another room on their own because they've come for the space. But they also need space."

The group has received a lot of attention from other organisations but Amanda has remained resolute in protecting this space from the neurotypical world.

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Seeking Support

National Autistic Society – provides a wealth of information along with a route to **diagnosis**. There is also a directory of services for autism and online forums for autistic people and their families

Autistic Parents UK – founded by autistic parents, provides online communities and peer to peer support. Offers online **training resources** for parents and organisations

Autistica undertakes research and advocates for those living an autistic life. One of their recent projects addresses autism in the **workplace**.