Autism Hub
West Cheshire

Coming Home:

The positive impact of autism hubs on a sense of belonging and mental well-being

What we do:

- The West Cheshire autism hub provides personalised support to autistic adults aged 16 and above, as well as their families, in the heart of the community.

Our services:

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Direct support offered by our service

- Helping to alleviate loneliness and isolation
- autism specific advice and support, including pre-and post-diagnostic support
- A variety of different activities and events
- Peer mentoring services

Social connection:

- *"A sense of belonging is a core part of what makes us human"*

(Allen et al., 2021, p. 96)

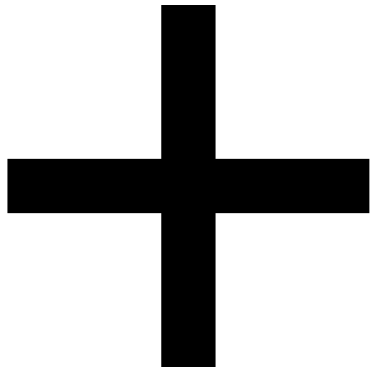
- Belonging: Feeling an integral part of a system (relational or organisational) or environment (natural or cultural) Hagerty et al., (1992)
- Two dimensions at play in the construct of belonging. The perceived value and the sense of 'fit'.

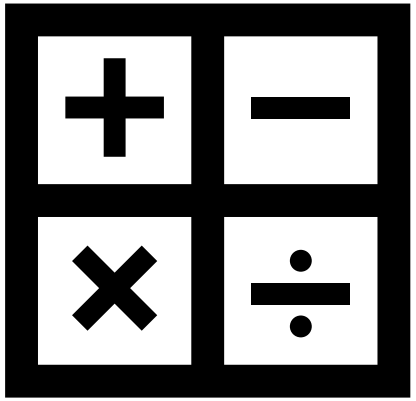
Inter-dependence:

- *"We do not exist on our own, but because of and in connection with the systems in which we reside"*

(Kern et al., 2020, p.709).

- *"Autism + Environment = outcome."*
- (Beardon, 2017, p. 11).





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The benefits:

- Countless psychosocial benefits associated with a robust sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021). Gariepy et al. (2016):social support providing protection against depression.
- Furthermore, a sense of belonging is especially pertinent in adolescence (Newman, Lohman and Newman, 2007).
- Conversely, not belonging has a detrimental impact on physical and mental health.
- "*Socially isolated people have shorter life spans and increased risk of a host of health problems, including infections, heart disease and depression*" (Miller, 2011, interview with Cacciopo).

Minority groups:

- Allen et al., (2021) stress in particular, the struggles, of marginalised or minority groups in terms of striving for a ‘sense of belonging’
- Interaction with non-autistic peers heighted their awareness of minority status and led to feelings of inadequacy and shame (Crompton et al. 2020).
- Autistic pupils whilst comparing themselves to their predominantly neurotypical peers, described themselves negatively, such as having a “*bad brain”*(Humphrey & Lewis, 2008)” p. 1445

Increased rate of Mental health conditions:

- "*The prevalence of comorbid mental health conditions in autism is strikingly high*" (Cage, Monaco and Newell, 2018, p.473)
- One co-existing disorder 70%. Two or more co-existing conditions 41%. Simonoff et al., (2008)
- 39.6% of autistic children and adolescents had 1 comorbid anxiety disorder (Van Steensel, Bogels and Perrin (2011).
- Autistic people are at an increased rate of suicide compared to the general population (Cassidy, 2014, 2018).

Loneliness:

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- Autistic loneliness is a key factor in poor mental health outcomes (Crompton et al., 2020),
- Furthermore, autistic people cannot elude the impact of being a minority as strategies such as masking/camouflaging comes at a cost to their mental health (Botha and Gillespie-Lynch, 2022).

Challenging the stereotypes:

- *"Autistic community may be undervalued as a phenomenon, due to the stereotypes society hold regarding autism, such as disinterest in friendship, and perceived isolation."* (pp 3-4).
- Many autistic individuals wish to socialise and have friendships (Crompton et al., 2020)
- *"Autistic people have reframed the diagnostic category 'autism', once conceptualised as an innate inability to connect socially, into a social identity*" (Botha and Gillespie-Lynch, 2022).

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- Botha, Dibb and Frost (2022) carried out an investigation of autistic community connectedness by interviewing 20 autistic adults
- Reported benefits: ending social isolation, enabled individuals to learn about themselves, to exchange advice and to make connections
- A feeling of belonging: "*a sense of a tribe among autistic people*"
- *"a general feeling that the autistic community was 'home'"* (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022, pp 12 -13)

The autistic voice:

"I was very isolated and then I met autistic people"

(May, aged 35 in Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022, p.18).

Autism identity:

- *"Autistic community connectedness may buffer against the impact of minority but perhaps only for those who hold the identification closely*." (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022, p. 10)
- Cooper et al., (2017). Reported autism identification, self-esteem and a collective self esteem as being core aspects of mental health and well-being.

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Acceptance:

- Crompton et al. (2020) highlighted that despite often struggling to navigate friendships, that many of their participants still aspired for social relationships. They felt a sense of understanding, acceptance and ability to be authentic.
- Autistic individuals experienced "*within neurotype ease*" p.1443

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"Autistic space is so validating compared with the outside world"
(Crompton et al., p. 1445)

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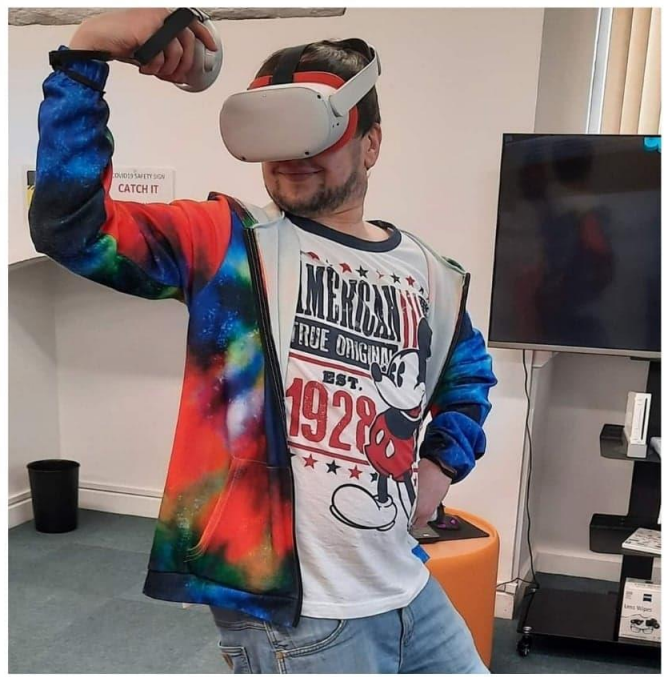
“I am me-and that is ok”

(Collins, taken from Autangel handbook)


CATCH IT
AMERICAN
TRUE ORIGINAL
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PIC•COLLAGE

Our growing team:

Two of our peer mentors

A social environment where autistic adults and their families, can access services, whilst feeling valued and welcome

Empowering:

“Learning one is autistic provides the chance to understand the self as autistic and not as a broken neurotypical, which can empower people to explore and nourish their own self-identities”. (Botha and Gillespie-Lynch, 2022., p. 104).

Why wait?

- Given the high rates of mental health conditions in the autistic population, the increased loneliness of minority groups and the known benefits of ‘belonging’, we need more ‘hubs’ in communities.
- The earlier that we can enable the development of positive autistic identity and community connectedness, the better!