



Healios

Former college lecturer diagnosed as autistic at 50 talks about her family's journey with autism

A specialist nurse has spoken about her journey from 'quirky' schoolgirl to a formal autism diagnosis at the age of 50 after being inspired to change careers after two of her sons also received the same diagnosis.

Former college lecturer Ren Martin, from Guisborough, North Yorkshire, now works as a Specialist Neurodevelopmental Practitioner at leading digital mental health provider Healios.

Healios adopts a digital-first clinical approach, and has redefined the way mental health, autism and ADHD services are delivered to children, young people and families in the UK since it was founded in 2013. It has the largest clinical workforce specialising in children's mental health, autism and ADHD services outside the NHS and offers online assessments and support to thousands via secure video sessions.

In her role, Ren carries out autism assessments on young people around the country, and has been speaking about her family's autism journey during World Autism Month.

The 56-year-old has four sons, with the oldest and youngest diagnosed autistic, and explained why she wanted to make the change in her career and the challenges in her path to hers and her two son's diagnosis.

She says: "I fully understand how difficult it is for families with children who are neurodiverse to get a diagnosis and the support they need to scaffold them through their education.

"I felt like so many young people were not reaching full potential because of difficulties in mainstream education settings that are not designed to support neurodiversity unless there is a diagnosis to access funding.

"I love carrying out assessments and meeting so many wonderful young people and their families, and supporting them.

"I was a stereotypical neurodiverse girl, excelled in primary school, had a small group of friends and was a bit 'quirky'. Transition to secondary school was difficult and I struggled through those years the way many other undiagnosed girls do.

"When my son was young his difficulties were apparent from primary school, but despite challenging behaviours that impacted on his education and mental health we struggled to get a diagnosis until he was in his early twenties.

“My younger son was a different child, and his diagnosis was at 17, simply in case he needed a safety net for college and university.

“I found out yesterday that it was one of my Healios colleagues that diagnosed my son in her former role. I recognised the traits in myself, and had a ‘formal’ NHS diagnosis when I was 50.”

With autism diagnosis firmly in the spotlight with recent high profile stories of celebrities talking about their own experiences, Ren highlighted what misconceptions she feels there are about it.

“People have two images of autism,” he says. “The more ‘profound’, requiring special education and support, or Sheldon Cooper and Chris Packham, quirky but successful. People don’t realise the spectrum is not linear, and we’re not ‘high functioning’.

“The difficulties my two sons experienced were very different, with my older son having more difficulties with mental health.

“It’s only recently with celebrities sharing their stories and issues they have experienced that people are realising the day to day struggle that the neurodiverse have with other issues such as their mental health, physical ailments associated with neurodiversity and the exhaustion of masking every day.

“I particularly dislike “we are all a bit on the spectrum” as I feel this trivialises the difficulties that many autistic people experience everyday.”

Since becoming a specialist in her field, Ren has continued an academic interest by joining with colleagues to research the link between neurodiversity and physical health, including a recent study on links between fibromyalgia, hypermobility and neurodivergence.

She says: “I’ve had a lot of physical pain from a young age, which was attributed to many things, mainly attention seeking or as an excuse to avoid school when younger. All four of my sons have similar issues, and they have a diagnosis of hypermobility.

“I too got a diagnosis of hypermobility, fibromyalgia and Ehlers Danlos syndrome in my early 50’s. Whilst carrying out autism assessments I realised that a lot of the young people we see have a combination of these conditions, but they’re usually more diagnosed with males.

“I carried out some research around the link between neurodiversity and physical health and there is an established link, but often healthcare providers are unaware of this, especially in females, and the treatment is usually ineffective.”

Ren has developed a passion for photography, which she shares with two of her children, and is currently working on a new exhibition she hopes to hold locally showcasing some of the images the family has produced.

She says: “I’ve always loved nature and have been keen on photography since a young age. Two of my sons followed my interest, but in different fields. I’m more focused on the micro

image, a lot of my shots of trees are around face pareidolia, seeing the face in everyday things.

“My youngest son takes the most amazing landscape shots and travels around the country in remote and abandoned sites to do this. My second oldest son is more of a nature photographer and takes stunning wildlife shots.

“For all of us the enjoyment is about being out in nature, it also tends to be a solo activity, which suits me and my autistic son. I love documenting the things I see, and sharing them with others who may see what I see in the shots.

“The exhibition is something we are planning, after my son suggested self publishing a book of our shots. I have a Facebook page called ‘Through an autistic lens’, where I post pictures of my walks, and this would be the title of our exhibition. My husband is an artist and has had his own exhibition and displays, and now it’s our turn.”

Healios is set to create more than 200 jobs in 2023 after a huge rise in demand for its services. Anyone interested in joining the team can find out more about the latest opportunities at healios.org.uk/careers

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Notes to editors

About Healios

Healios is the leading digital provider of specialist mental health, autism and ADHD services for children and young people in the UK aged 25 and under. Healios is reimagining the care experience by optimally combining an expert multidisciplinary care team with evidence-based, family-centred approaches and great technology.

Proudly working in partnership with 62% of the UK’s NHS children and adolescent mental health services, Healios is the largest private digital provider of specialist mental health and neurodevelopmental assessment, diagnosis and intervention services for children and young people, supporting over 37,000 patients.

For more information visit: Healios.org.uk