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## Supporting autistic people with their life goals: an interview with Richard Maguire

### 1. Can you tell us how you first became interested in autism?

I think I was interested in autism for as long as I could remember, from childhood, but I hadn't got a name, and I didn't know what it was about, but I knew I was different and I knew there were some others a bit like me, and I just didn't know what it was. And I first heard the term 'autism' in 1985, when I worked in an old mental handicap hospital that used to have back in the day, and I was introduced to some young men that I was going to work with, and I heard the term 'autism' and as soon as I got to know them, and read about their condition and their life, I worked out it applied to me. But I didn't tell anyone back then because the diagnostic criteria for someone like me hadn't been written, and people I think would have been, well, they wouldn't have believed me if I'd told them I had autism, because I held onto it for a number of years.

### 2. Can you tell us about your current work?

My current work is I work doing autism mentoring, training, consultancy, anything with autism in it, and what I do is go in there as an autistic person, tanked up with a lifetime's knowledge, tons of the book knowledge as well and [??] research and what have you, and then I go into people's lives and situations and workplaces, schools, what have you, and I sense it as an autistic person. I think what I do is provide like an interpretation service. I get from them how they're dealing with it, be it verbal, non-verbal, see how their lives are, and interpret it out for other people, just to clear up things, and it's usually surprisingly simple.

### 3. What advice would you give autistic people to help them manage stress?

I think two sorts of advice, one is: know your sensory needs and how you're sensing the world, and do what you need to do about that. For a lot of non-autistic people, the things we need to do seem counter-intuitive, and we often feel reticent about doing it, because it draws down opprobrium from people around us and we've been trained not to do what we need to do, so,

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get back in touch with that and do these things, and also there's quite a few tips and tricks of passing a lot of this stuff under people's radar. I'm not ashamed of anything I need to do, but sometimes the social opprobrium is just so bad, there's ways of doing it, and I'm actually stimming and relaxing right now but unless somebody knows what's going on, it's happening.

The other thing I think I'd say is get in touch with who you are, your autistic self and your passionate interests. Those are key for our lives, those will provide us with relaxation, happiness, friendships, jobs, relationships, many, many things come from that. There's more than one, feel free to take, to shut one down, open up a new one, that's fine, but get in touch with them.

#### **4. How can professionals support autistic people to define their goals in life?**

I think one of the things is don't make assumptions on behalf of the autistic person. We have got goals, we're used to communicating to them, but people don't know how to listen to us, and also their framework is different to ours, and very often they read us wrong, and they often will then try, with the best will in the world, to do the wrong thing.

Listen, to what the person's saying. It's deep down in there and we've buried it for so long, it's very often hard for us to say it, and then sometimes when we do say it out loud, people think "Well, that's odd." But it wouldn't be, of course, be what their goal in life might be. We like to concentrate, we like to focus, we've got interests, so just listen!

And also, when you're listening, remember, keep the body space, get the sensory down, and there's one other thing too with autism when you're working with us, is before anything can happen, the anxiety and the sensory needs have to be sorted. Until then, you've got a person who's majorly shut down, and not capable really of showing you what's going on. Do them two things first, then learn how we communicate, engage, and then things happen surprisingly quickly.

#### **5. How can professionals support autistic people to achieve their life goals?**

To achieve life goals... now I'm a very, very visually orientated autistic person, and I'm thinking of a football goal that is now alive, so I have to-- this is one way to support us; help us to know how we process, then I've got to translate that, that means something that somebody wants to do in life that's important, it's going to make good things happen for them. Takes a while, so for a start, just listen, wait, see what we might be doing, it may seem almost unattainable, it might seem strange, we may seem to be scrabbling around, rather pitifully looking for a goal, but actually we're testing the water, we're nibbling around at the edge; we will go for it.

Give us time, give us space, and also the encouragement; if you can't see how we're going to get there, we can, just give us the space, I mean I do mentor a lot of autistic adults, and it takes...it can take a year or so before they'll even say what their goal is, and then when one looks at it, it's often you find the evidence for that goal was back in childhood; there's something they've always wanted to do, and they're nibbling around at it.

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There's somebody I know who loves working outdoors in the roads environment, well there's lots of jobs out there, aren't there? Many, many things, didn't realise quite how much there is. And they're building at the moment the component skills they need to get on with colleagues before they're going to look for jobs on roads, and there's a lot there.

So, it's that building up; it takes time. Listen, but also learn how to listen like an autistic person. They're in there, we communicate it, in ways... we don't give you wholes and concepts so much that a non-autistic person can do. We will spit out little bits of detail; help us watch the pattern in all those details. There's the goal, go with it, and if we've got a life goal, we actually have got a very poor sense of our self-esteem or what we're capable of, and if we reckon we can do it we can usually do it extraordinarily well, we don't overegg, we underrepresent ourselves, so if a person says they're capable, believe them, they'll go for it.