

# Diagnosed with Autism at Age 35

*Deborah Allen*

## BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Read about the definitions of autism on pp. 12-13. What do you think the consequences would be of receiving an autism diagnosis at age 35 instead of as a child?
2. Do you have an experience (or does someone in your family have the experience) of it taking a long time to get a diagnosis? Describe what that was like.

## I Didn't Fit In

I grew up having autism, but I didn't know it. Looking back, I think that's why I hated going to school. If it had been up to me, I would have dropped out at age seven. School felt like a waste of time, and I felt unhappy there. I didn't fit in with other students. I couldn't communicate. I felt dumb and depressed. In addition to those feelings, my family moved often, and adjusting to new schools, teachers, and classrooms was difficult. At age 15, I stopped going.

## Found a Way to Get My GED

When I was 24, I started thinking about going back to school to get my GED. I wanted to gain more confidence. I enrolled at a community college for GED classes when I was 25. Going back to school was difficult. I was still dealing with familiar challenges from childhood—things like poor communication, emotional strain, and the persistent sense that I didn't measure up.

Thankfully, my instructors were very nice and supportive. They helped me in specific ways. For example, they showed me how to sign up for accommodations to get extended time on my exam. I had to study hard for my tests, and I failed several times. It took a lot of hard work and help from my instructors for me to pass my GED. I am a high school graduate, class of 2001.



## A Life-Changing Moment

After earning my GED, I decided to continue my education at the community college. My first class was Diversified Career Training, which involved goal-setting, job interviewing, and budgeting. I learned some valuable communication skills through role-playing. Over time, I gained confidence in socializing with people. I learned how to develop a positive mindset. I got to practice conversation, and I learned the importance of putting my thoughts and feelings into the conversation.

At age 35, a *life-changing* moment came during a conversation with one of my teachers, who had a PhD in psychology. I told him I was struggling—I felt depressed, emotionally stressed, tired of feeling dumb, and full of anger. He suggested I may be on the autism spectrum, and maybe I should go to counseling to learn how

to manage life with this condition. That small moment was like a light switching on in my mind. His advice opened me up to new tools and a different way of seeing and doing things.

### Finally Getting Help

The college offered short-term counseling, so I signed up and gave it a try. After 35 years of holding in my feelings and not having a voice, I finally began to face the anger I had carried for so long. Counseling wasn't easy, but with effort and honesty, it helped me work through that pain.

Along the way, my communication and social skills improved, and I started to build self-confidence. From there, my life moved in a more positive direction. I no longer feel defined by my disability. Instead, I'm defined by my strength to overcome challenges, my ability to grow, and my determination to achieve. It felt like leaving an old life behind and starting a new one.

I thank the Lord for these programs and the encouragement from my instructors to continue learning. Now, I'm taking a writing class. It is all part of my plan to write my own happy ending.

#### AFTER YOU READ:

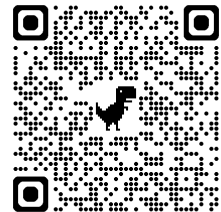
1. How did it affect Deborah that she grew up having autism but didn't know it?
2. What are the specific ways Deborah got help from adult education programs? Take it further and share this resource with your program: [The Basic Disability Screenings for Adult Education Program Use](#), published by SABES.
3. Deborah describes a *life-changing* moment she had when she was talking to one of her teachers. Have you ever had a life-changing moment in your adult education program? Describe it to a partner and then write about it.

*Deborah Allen is a sister and caretaker to her special needs brother. She has worked as a cashier and self-checkout monitor at a grocery store for over 28 years. She studied for her GED from 1992 to 2001 at Seminole State College in Sanford, Florida. In 2023, she enrolled in Essential Education's online Job Ready program and earned certificates in the Work Essentials and Computer Essentials courses. She plans to continue her education.*

## Write Your Own Essay Using these Four Stories about Autism



The stories on pp. 12-17 are all by adult learners with autism. This google doc (<https://tinyurl.com/writeaboutautism>, also linked via the QR code) is a graphic organizer you can use to collect details from the stories. Use one of the following prompts and write an essay.



1. According to the authors, what are some gifts and challenges for adult learners with autism?
2. What are some key features of adult education classrooms and programs that support adult learners with autism?

Once you decide on the topic of your essay, follow these steps:

1. Develop a thesis.
2. Gather evidence from the stories to back up your thesis.
3. Organize the evidence into paragraphs.
4. Use quotation marks for direct quotes.
5. Cite your sources.
6. Write a draft, get feedback, and re-write.