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## Even mild face blindness can cause serious difficulties in daily life – new study

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**Judith Lowes**

Lecturer in Psychology, University of Stirling

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Have you ever been ignored by someone you knew when you bumped into them in the street or at an event? If so, you probably thought they were being rude. But they might have face blindness – a condition officially known as [developmental prosopagnosia](#).

In a [new study](#) my colleagues and I conducted, 29 adults with face blindness revealed the daily challenges they face. Ten of the participants said they could not reliably recognise immediate family members, and 12 couldn't recognise closest friends in out-of-context or unexpected encounters. Yet many felt it was socially difficult to admit these struggles.

One of the participants didn't recognise her husband of 30 years when he unexpectedly came to pick her up from the airport. Another described how “when I am off work for a week and come back it's really hard to figure out who is who”.

Although public awareness of face blindness is low, there is a high chance that you already know someone with face recognition difficulties. Around one in 50 people have developmental prosopagnosia, a lifelong condition that causes severe face recognition difficulties despite otherwise normal vision, IQ and memory.

Researchers usually describe not being able to recognise close friends and family as a “severe” form of prosopagnosia, but our new study – conducted with a colleague at Dartmouth College in the US – shows that even people classified as having “mild” prosopagnosia can have serious difficulties in daily life. This suggests that prosopagnosia diagnosis should consider real-life experiences, not just lab tests.

Most face-blind participants who took part in the research had tried various strategies to recognise people. However, these methods required huge mental effort and often didn’t work. For example, keeping detailed notes, or even spreadsheets, with descriptions and cues about people they have met. Or mentally trying to associate a name with a personally distinctive feature.

However, participants admitted their strategies were often “exhausting” and were particularly difficult to use at work when they were busy, concentrating on a task, or because colleagues wore uniforms or similar work clothing.

Some prosopagnosics said they used unusual ways to recognise others, for example, by smell. Another said that worrying about a face distracted them, so they found it more helpful to look at people from behind to work out who they were.

Prosopagnosics told researchers how their condition caused them considerable difficulties at school, at work and in everyday social situations. Two-thirds of the prosopagnosics said they could recognise fewer than ten familiar faces. Previous research suggests most adults recognise around 5,000 faces, so this difference is huge.

A widespread worry among people with face blindness was being misjudged as rude, uncaring, or even “a bit dim” by others who didn’t understand the condition. This concern often led to social anxiety and reduced self-confidence in social situations.

A common coping strategy was to avoid social gatherings or to deliberately keep social circles small to limit the number of faces people had to try and learn. But these strategies sometimes had a downside.

Looking back on their lives, some people felt that their face recognition difficulties had left them socially isolated, or with “poorly developed” social skills because they hadn’t mixed much with others while growing up.

Prosopagnosics were asked what they thought future research into face blindness should focus on. Their top priority was improved awareness and understanding that this condition exists and how it affects people. They thought this was particularly important for employers, schools and medical staff – but also for the general public.

The research found that many simple things could make life much easier for people with face recognition difficulties. Providing large name badges at events and conferences is a simple but helpful adjustment.

Participants said they found it a huge relief when meetings started with a round of introductions, the chair always addressed people by name, or they were given seating plans. Hot desking causes problems, so keeping a regular seating plan in a workplace or classroom can help face-blind people learn who usually sits where.



Prosopagnosics found it helpful when meetings started with introductions. Stefan Dahl Langstrup/Alamy Stock Photo

If you are meeting a face-blind friend, sending a quick message beforehand to let them know what you are wearing and exactly where you are sitting can also help.

## **A form of neurodivergence**

My colleagues and I believe that developmental prosopagnosia should be considered a type of neurodivergence. This term describes someone whose brain works differently from what is considered typical. It usually includes people with autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Recognising face blindness as a form of neurodivergence isn't just about awareness, it's about dignity, inclusion and making everyday life easier for thousands of people.