

Things You Might Not Know About ASD/Aspergers

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD or Autism for short) is a neurological condition (some people call it 'neurobiological'). If a person has ASD, they have it from the time they are born, and for their whole life. With the right support and/or treatment, people with ASD can grow up to be happy in life, and, over time, symptoms that bother them might improve a lot.

However, some people with ASD have a combination of ASD traits/symptoms that are less obvious, or not obvious at all, to most people, especially when they are a young child. I sometimes like to use the term Aspergers to refer to people with ASD who are like this. Many people with Aspergers are not diagnosed until they are teenagers, if at all. A person with ASD cannot receive the right type of formal support and/or treatment until they have been diagnosed with ASD. Some people with Aspergers do not need or want any formal support and/or treatment, but many desperately do.

- As per the rest of the population, people with ASD/Aspergers learn and develop over time, often behave differently in different social situations, and their interests can change over time. People with ASD/Aspergers are just as complex as anyone else, and in many cases, even more so.
- No two people with ASD/Aspergers are the same. In fact, the strengths/weaknesses of one autistic person can be quite the opposite of the strengths/weaknesses of another autistic person.

A young adult friend of mine*, who has experience with ASD, through people she knows with ASD, and research she has done on the topic, shared the following insight with me:

“Autistic people might have hyper-empathy, or the opposite. As with most symptoms of autism, it seems to be all or nothing. For example, one autistic person might have a love of jumping because of under stimulation, whilst another might shut down due to walking being too bouncy.”

- People with ASD/Aspergers are prone to experiencing sensory overload. A person with ASD/Aspergers might have certain specific sensory triggers that are particularly difficult for them to cope with. However, when a person with ASD/Aspergers experiences sensory overload, it's often due to a build-up of a number of sensory triggers. *This same young adult friend of mine has advised me that:

“When autistic people experience sensory overload, it's usually because the autistic mind can't filter stuff out. An annoying noise might bother a neurotypical (i.e., 'mainstream') person for a little while and then effectively 'disappear', but to an autistic person, that noise will always be annoying. Therefore, a second annoying noise might annoy both people equally, but because the autistic person was already dealing with the first annoying noise, they are more likely to be overwhelmed.”

- People with ASD/Aspergers experience sensory issues, and many often experience extreme emotions. However, their sensitivities are not all negative. They don't just experience sensory triggers, but also sensory buzzers (*my “[Handbook for Teenagers with ASD/Aspergers, and their Parents](#)”, which is available for free on this website, contains a section called “**Sensory Issues**”, which explains sensory triggers and sensory buzzers*).

If a person with ASD/Aspergers is prone to experiencing extreme emotions, they don't just experience a higher level of anxiety, anger, or despair over negative experiences, but also a higher level of excitement and joy over positive experiences. However, this can be a double-edged sword. A person with ASD/Aspergers can feel such bliss, when having a positive experience, that to feel normal again hurts.

- Some teenagers with Aspergers, especially males, express their feelings of distress with obvious behaviours that are problematic for other people. When this happens, such teenagers with Aspergers tend to get told off, which can make them feel bad. However, at least they get noticed, which can lead to a diagnosis, which can (hopefully) lead to appropriate support/treatment.

Other teenagers with Aspergers, especially females (like my daughter), do not express their feelings of distress in an obvious manner, or in a manner that is problematic for other people. They might withdraw into themselves, and/or bottle up their emotions, and/or be unable to speak about their emotions. Many self-harm. Some even die by suicide. I suspect that there have probably been many people with Aspergers who have died by suicide with no-one really knowing why, because they'd gone unnoticed, undiagnosed and no-one understood them.

- ASD in itself is not a psychological condition. As I've already mentioned, it is a neurological condition. However, the difficulties experienced by people with ASD, as a result of their ASD, often lead them to experience psychological conditions, like anxiety and/or depression. People with Aspergers are often not diagnosed as having ASD when they are younger children. When they reach adolescence, or even later, they are often diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression, but their ASD is missed and remains undiagnosed. In such situations, the psychological conditions of anxiety and/or depression that the person with Aspergers is experiencing will be treated in a standard way, but their ASD/Aspergers issues will not be addressed, because they have not yet been diagnosed with ASD.

To treat someone with ASD/Aspergers for 'standard' anxiety and/or depression in a standard way, without addressing their ASD/Aspergers issues, can be like this:

A patient goes to see a doctor because they are experiencing pain in their arm. When they try to use their arm in a normal way, it causes the pain to increase. The pain is caused by the fact that their arm has been malformed* internally since birth. Since the patient was born, and until this point, the malformation has caused the function of the malformed arm to be slightly different to what is normal, but not enough to be noticeable to most people. The malformation did not cause the patient to experience pain in their arm when they were a younger child. For these reasons, the malformation has never been discovered or diagnosed.

However, since the patient has reached a further stage of growth, the malformation is now causing pain in their malformed arm. There are specialised treatments that could alleviate the pain caused by this particular condition, and improve the function of the malformed arm. However, the doctor does not pick up that the arm is malformed internally.

The doctor treats the patient by telling them to take analgesic medication, and to do exercises that consist of using their malformed arm in a normal way (which causes the pain to increase, which is one of the reasons why they went to see a doctor in the first place). This treatment does not alleviate the pain, nor does it improve the function of the malformed arm. Instead, it makes the pain and function of the malformed arm worse.

*(*I am not suggesting that people with ASD are malformed. I have used the term 'malformed' for the purpose of this analogy only.)*

People with ASD/Aspergers can be at risk of developing symptoms of psychosis, which can be very disturbing for the person with ASD/Aspergers, can be very complex, and are often misdiagnosed. Sadly, as I've already mentioned, there is a risk of suicide amongst people with ASD/Aspergers.

My 'Handbook for Teenagers with ASD/Aspergers, and their Parents' contains a section called "**Emotional Issues (& Communication Issues)**", which explains, in more detail, the emotional/psychological issues often experienced by people with ASD.

- One main type of support/treatment that teenagers with ASD/Aspergers will likely need is regular ongoing psychotherapy with a psychologist who specialises in ASD/Aspergers, to help them to:
 - adjust to, and cope with, accepting the changes that their feelings, thoughts and bodies are going through as they are growing up;
 - understand the world and themselves; and
 - deal with issues to do with their sense of identity and social interaction.

They might need ongoing psychotherapy throughout their lives.

- Many people with what I sometimes like to call Aspergers who aren't diagnosed at an early age assume that everyone thinks the same way as they do. I think that it is probably human nature to do so. Many people with Aspergers who aren't diagnosed at

an early age don't start to realise, until they are teenagers, or older, that they think differently, and experience the world differently, to most other people. Some people with ASD/Aspergers might never realise that they think differently, and experience the world differently to most other people, OR, they might have an inkling, but never fully understand how different they are to most other people.

Many people with ASD/Aspergers don't really feel comfortable and confident in themselves, and with the world, until they reach the age of about 30, or even 40, due to, among other things, issues with their sense of identity. However, by that age, many people with Aspergers have made big life decisions that might not be ideal for them, because they assume that they are 'normal' and should do what normal people do. The ramifications of such big life decisions can turn out to be difficult for a person with Aspergers to cope with.

- Some people with ASD/Aspergers like and need to live in a culture where there are very clear and strict rules, and where there are always plenty of people telling them exactly how to behave, what their role is, and where they fit in society, because this gives them a sense of identity and certainty about the future. Further, because some people with ASD/Aspergers are never able to function as a completely independent individual, such cultures suit them, because, in such cultures, a person is never expected to know everything and be able to do everything for themselves, as they are always a part of a family unit, or some other social unit.

However, some people with ASD/Aspergers do not like or do well living in such cultures, because they never feel like they fit in, and/or they feel like they simply cannot carry out the role that they are expected to. This can cause the person with ASD/Aspergers to experience feelings of inadequacy, frustration and/or unhappiness, and to behave in ways that might cause other people to berate them.

Some people with ASD/Aspergers like and need to live in a culture that encourages individuality, where they can be accepted for being the unique individual that they are.

However, some people with ASD/Aspergers do not like or do well living in such cultures, because having too many choices can distress someone with ASD/Aspergers. In such cultures, people, including people with ASD/Aspergers, often hear the message that it's

important to, 'be yourself,' or, 'be true to yourself'. To a person with ASD/Aspergers, such phrases can seem very abstract, OR, the person with ASD/Aspergers can take the notion to the extreme, and feel that if they are not able to 'be themselves' in all ways and at all times, but are sometimes unsure, or waver, then they must in some way be bad, or a failure.

People with ASD/Aspergers often take longer to find their own identity, or do not have a strong sense of their own identity. Young adults with ASD/Aspergers often don't know who 'myself' is. Not being sure of who 'yourself' is, in a culture that highly values individuality, can lead to feelings of confusion, distress, inadequacy and/or unhappiness.