

Asperger syndrome and adults

Asperger syndrome is one of the autism spectrum disorders, and is classified as a developmental disorder that affects how the brain processes information. People with Asperger syndrome can show a wide range of behaviours and social skills, but common characteristics include difficulty in forming friendships, communication problems (such as an inability to listen or a tendency to take whatever is said to them literally), and an inability to understand social rules and body language.

There is no cure and no specific treatment. Asperger syndrome doesn't improve, although experience helps to build up coping skills. Social training, which teaches how to behave in different social situations, is generally more helpful than counselling. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is being increasingly used to assist the person with Asperger Syndrome understand and manage their behavioural responses.

Typical adult symptoms

More males than females have Asperger syndrome. While every person who has the syndrome will experience different symptoms and severity of symptoms, some of the more common characteristics include:

- Average or above average intelligence
- Inability to think in abstract ways
- Difficulties in empathising with others
- Problems with understanding another person's point of view
- Hampered conversational ability
- Problems with controlling feelings such as anger, depression and anxiety
- Adherence to routines and schedules, and stress if expected routine is disrupted
- Inability to manage appropriate social conduct
- Specialised fields of interest or hobbies.

The emotions of other people

A person with Asperger syndrome may have trouble understanding the emotions of other people, and the subtle messages that are sent by facial expression, eye contact and body language are often missed. Because of this, a person with Asperger syndrome might be seen as egotistical, selfish or uncaring. These are unfair labels, because the affected person is neurologically unable to understand other people's emotional states. They are usually shocked, upset and remorseful when told their actions were hurtful or inappropriate.

Sexual codes of conduct

Research into the sexual understanding of people with Asperger syndrome is in its infancy. Studies suggest that affected people are as interested in sex as anyone else, but many don't have the social or empathetic skills to successfully manage adult relationships.

Delayed understanding is common; for example, a person with Asperger syndrome aged in their 20s typically has the sexual codes of conduct befitting a teenager. Even affected people who are high achieving and academically or vocationally successful have trouble negotiating the 'hidden rules' of courtship. Inappropriate sexual behaviour can result.

Being a partner and parent

Some affected people can maintain relationships and parent children, although there are challenges.

A common marital problem is unfair distribution of responsibilities. For example, the partner of a person with Asperger syndrome may be used to doing everything in the relationship when it is just the two of them. However, the partner may need practical and emotional support once children come along, which the person with Asperger syndrome is ill equipped to provide. When the partner expresses frustration or becomes upset that they're given no help of any kind, the person with Asperger syndrome is typically baffled. Tension in the relationship often makes their symptoms worse.

The workplace

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, in conjunction with a range of specialist employment services, helps to place people with disabilities in the workforce. A person with Asperger syndrome may find their job opportunities limited by their disability. It may help to choose a vocation that takes into account the individual's symptoms, and plays to the strengths rather than the weaknesses. The following career suggestions are adapted from material written by Temple Grandin, who has high-functioning autism and is an assistant professor at Colorado University, USA.

Careers to avoid - suggestions

Careers that rely on short term memory should be avoided. Examples include:

- Cashier
- Short order cook
- Waitress
- Taxi dispatcher
- Air traffic controller
- Receptionist.

Career suggestions for visual thinkers

Suggestions include:

- Computer programming
- Drafting
- Commercial art
- Photography
- Equipment design
- Mechanic
- Appliance repair
- Handcraft artisan
- Webpage designer
- Video game designer
- Building maintenance
- Building trades.

Career suggestions for those good at mathematics or music

Suggestions include:

- Accounting
- Computer programming
- Engineering
- Journalist, copy editor
- Taxi driver
- Piano (or other musical instrument) tuner
- Filing positions
- Statistician
- Physician
- Mathematician
- Bank teller
- Telemarketing.

Common issues for partners

An adult's diagnosis of Asperger syndrome often tends to follow their child's diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. This 'double whammy' can be extremely distressing to the partner who has to cope simultaneously with both diagnoses. Counselling, or joining a support group where they can talk with other people who face the same challenges, can be helpful. Some common issues for partners include:

- Feeling overly responsible for their partner.
- Failure to have their own needs met by the relationship.
- Lack of emotional support from family members and friends who don't fully understand or appreciate the extra strains placed on a relationship by Asperger syndrome.
- A sense of isolation, because the challenges of their relationship are different and not easily understood by others.
- Frustration, since problems in the relationship don't seem to improve despite great efforts.
- Frequent wondering about whether or not to end the relationship.
- Difficulties in accepting that their partner won't recover from Asperger syndrome.
- After accepting that their partner's Asperger syndrome won't get better, common emotions include guilt, despair and disappointment.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Austism Infoline Tel. 1300 308 699 or email info@autismvictoria.org.au
- Autism Victoria Tel. (03) 9885 0533
- The Centre for Developmental Disability Health Victoria (CDDHV) Tel. (03) 9564 7511
- Asperger Syndrome Support Network Tel. (03) 9845 2766
- Bendigo Regional Autism/Asperger Network (BRAAN) Tel. (03) 5442 5926
- Commonwealth Department of Community and Family Services Tel. 1300 653 227
- Alpha Autism Employment Program Tel. (03) 9681 9311

Things to remember

- A person with Asperger syndrome often has trouble understanding the emotions of other people, and the subtle messages that are sent by facial expression, eye contact and body language are often missed.
- Social training, which teaches how to behave in different social situations, is generally more helpful to a person with Asperger syndrome than counselling.

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Autism Victoria

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