

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 have a wide range of strengths, weaknesses, skills and difficulties.

Common characteristics include difficulty in forming friendships, communication difficulties (such as a tendency to take things literally), and an inability to understand social rules and body language. Asperger syndrome is also known as Asperger Disorder.

Although Asperger syndrome cannot be cured, appropriate intervention and experience can help individuals to develop skills, compensatory strategies and help build up coping skills. Social skills training, which teaches individuals how to behave in different social situations, is often considered to be of great value to people with Asperger syndrome.

Counselling or psychological therapy (including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) can help people with Asperger syndrome understand and manage their behavioural responses.

Typical adult symptoms

More males than females are diagnosed with 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
- Difficulties with high-level language skills such as verbal reasoning, problem solving, making inferences and predictions
- Difficulties in empathising with others
- Problems with understanding another person's point of view
- Difficulties engaging in social routines such as conversations and 'small talk'
- Problems with controlling feelings such as anger, depression and anxiety
- A preference for routines and schedules which can result in stress or anxiety if a routine is disrupted
- 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 sent by facial expression, eye contact and body language are often missed or misinterpreted. Because of this, people with Asperger syndrome might be mistakenly perceived as being egotistical, selfish or uncaring.

These are unfair labels because the person concerned is neurologically unable to understand other people's emotional states. People with Asperger syndrome 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 individuals with Asperger syndrome are as interested in sex as anyone else, but many struggle with the myriad of complex skills required to successfully negotiate intimate relationships.

People with Asperger syndrome can sometimes appear to have an 'inappropriate', 'immature' or 'delayed' understanding of sexual codes of conduct. This can sometimes result in sexually inappropriate behaviour. For example, a 20-year-old with Asperger syndrome may display behaviours which befit a teenager.

Even individuals who are high achieving and academically or vocationally successful can have trouble negotiating the 'hidden rules' of courtship.

Common issues for partners

Some people with Asperger syndrome can successfully maintain relationships and parent children. However, like most relationships, 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, something that the person with Asperger syndrome may be ill equipped to provide.

When the partner expresses frustration or becomes upset that they are given no help of any kind, the person with Asperger syndrome is typically baffled. Tension in the relationship often makes their symptoms worse.

An adult's diagnosis of Asperger syndrome often follows 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 of people with Asperger syndrome 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 do not 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 unique and not easily understood by others.
- Frustrations, since problems in the relationship do not seem to improve despite great efforts.
- Doubting the integrity of the relationship, or frequently wondering about whether or not to end the relationship.
- Difficulties in accepting that their partner will not 'recover' from Asperger syndrome.
- After accepting that their partner's Asperger syndrome cannot be 'cured', partners can often experience emotions such as guilt, despair and disappointment.

The workplace

The Commonwealth Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 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 their symptoms, and capitalises on their strengths rather than highlights their weaknesses.

Career suggestions for visual thinkers

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. 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.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Asperger Syndrome Support Network Tel. (03) 9845 2766
- Autism Victoria trading as amaze Tel. (03) 9657 1600 or 1300 308 699
- Bendigo Autism Asperger Group (BAAG)
- Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) Tel. 1300 653 227
- Alpha Autism Employment Program Tel. (03) 9885 2777

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 skills training, which teaches people with Asperger syndrome how to behave in different social situations, is often considered to be of great value to individuals with this syndrome.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Autism Victoria trading as amaze

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