Autism spectrum disorder and adults

Summary

- People on the autism spectrum often experience difficulties when trying to understand the emotions of other people. Subtle messages that are sent by facial expression, eye contact and body language are often missed.
- Social skills training can assist people on the autism spectrum to identify different social settings and what the social expectations are in that setting.

Asperger syndrome now comes under the single umbrella term of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Since 2013 Asperger syndrome is no longer diagnosed but instead a diagnosis of ASD is given. It is classified as a neuro-developmental condition that affects how the brain processes information. People on the autism spectrum have a wide range of strengths, weaknesses, skills and challenges.

Common characteristics include:

- difficulties interpreting social rules and body language, which can lead to confusion or misunderstandings
- difficulty in forming and maintaining friendships
- a tendency to take things literally, which can lead to communication difficulties

Although ASD cannot be cured, appropriate intervention and support can help people to develop skills and coping strategies. Social skills training can assist people on the autism spectrum in understanding how to read the different expectations of social situations.

Counselling or psychological therapy can help people on the autism spectrum to understand and manage their behavioural responses.

New ASD classification system

In 2013 the diagnostic criteria for autism and Asperger syndrome changed. Consequently, what was previously diagnosed as Asperger syndrome is now diagnosed as autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

This change was the result of decades of research that indicated there was not enough evidence to suggest that the conditions of autism and Asperger syndrome were distinct conditions.

Some people who were diagnosed with Asperger syndrome in the past continue to identify with this diagnosis. They will still be able to refer to their condition as Asperger syndrome, despite the fact that it is no longer a formal diagnosis.

Symptoms of ASD

More males than females are diagnosed with ASD (although there is mounting evidence to suggest that girls and women are underdiagnosed).

Every person on the autism spectrum is different but some of the more common characteristics include:

- difficulties with high-level language skills such as verbal reasoning, problem solving, making inferences and predictions
- problems with understanding another person’s point of view
- difficulties initiating social interactions and maintaining an interaction
- may not respond in the way that is expected in a social interaction
• a preference for routines and schedules – disruption of a routine can result in stress or anxiety
• specialised fields of interest or hobbies.

Diagnosis of ASD in adults

It is not unusual for people on the autism spectrum to have reached adulthood without a diagnosis.

Sometimes people will read some information or see something about ASD that makes them think ‘That sounds like me.’ They may then choose to talk to a health professional for a diagnosis, or they may not.

You may choose to seek a diagnosis for suspected ASD if:
• you have been diagnosed with a mental health condition or intellectual disability during childhood or adolescence, but think that you may have ASD
• you have struggled with feeling socially isolated and different
• your child or other family member has been diagnosed with ASD and some of the characteristics of autism sound familiar to you.

If you wish to seek an assessment for ASD, you can:
• talk to a psychologist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism
• talk to your GP
• seek a referral to a psychiatrist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism from your GP.
  (They can also provide a referral to see a psychologist, although you do not require one to make an appointment.)

A psychologist or psychiatrist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism will ask you about your childhood, and experiences at school and as an adult. They may also do some psychological or psychiatric testing.

A speech therapist may also be consulted to assess your social communication skills.

All of this information will be used to help make a diagnosis.

If you are diagnosed with ASD, you may feel relieved to know why you feel or behave the way you do. A diagnosis may also help you and your family to understand and cope with the challenges you face.

ASD and understanding the emotions of other people

A person on the autism spectrum may find it hard to understand the emotions of other people.

Emotions are interpreted by subtle messages sent by facial expression, eye contact and body language. These are often missed or misinterpreted by a person on the autism spectrum. Because of this, people on the autism spectrum might be mistakenly perceived as being rude or unfeeling.

People on the autism spectrum may be unaware of how others perceive their behaviour.

Partners of people with ASD

Some people on the autism spectrum will successfully maintain relationships. However, like most relationships, there are challenges.

An adult’s diagnosis of ASD often follows their child’s diagnosis of ASD or that of another relative. 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.

A partner on the autism spectrum, like any partner, will have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to relationships. A neuro-typical partner may find that there are communication breakdowns, such as misunderstandings or finding that your partner is not able to anticipate your feelings. A partner on the autism spectrum may need routine, order and time to pursue their hobbies.

Relationship counselling with a counsellor or psychologist experienced at working with people on the autism spectrum can assist couples to develop strategies and to communicate more effectively with each other.
Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Amaze (previously Autism Victoria) Tel. (03) 9657 1600
- Aspergers Victoria

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