Aspergers in Adults – Missing Piece of the Puzzle?

‘People with AS are like salt water fish that are forced to live in fresh water. We are fine if you just put us into the right environment. When the person with AS and the environment match, the problems go away and we even thrive. When we don’t we seem disabled’. Baron -Cohen S (2003)
Disorder…?

When someone is alone, relaxed and enjoying a special interest, the characteristics of AS do not cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning.

“The difference between high-functioning and low-functioning is that high-functioning means your deficits are ignored, and low-functioning means your assets are ignored.”

Laura Tisoncik (from Circle of Moms blog)

False Causes

- Cold parenting (esp mother)
- Injuries
- Vaccines
Possible increase risks / causes

- Paternal age at conception
- Genes (can be mutation) (200-400)
- Identical Twins 77%
- Fraternal Twins 31%
- 1 in 5 families more than one. Second usually more severe.

… we recognise that children who are aggressive (i.e. boys) are more likely to be referred for a diagnostic assessment to determine whether the behaviour is due to a specific developmental disorder and for advice on behaviour management.”

Tony Attwood

Today

- So anyone born before 1980 is very unlikely to have been diagnosed Asperger’s.
- Attwood - up to 50% children & adults not diagnosed.
- Struggling through life not understanding why it’s hard.
- Childhood markers and measures not as applicable.
Strong sense of difference

- Never fitting in, feel like an outsider, feel like from another planet
- Look for explanations for difference – gender identity a common response

Elements include

- Social
- Sensory
- Communication
- Cognitive

Note - adults typically learn to accommodate these symptoms so they are not always obvious to spot!
Social Challenges

- Difficulty making friends after early childhood
- Usually preferring solitary play
- Not understanding social convention
- Not understanding how to maintain friends
- Failing to recognise boundaries & hierarchies
- Not responding to social opportunity
- Lack of interest in initiating social contact
- Difficulty generalising social rules to new contexts

Low Empathy?

- Intuitive echoing of another person’s experience with appropriate response.
- Differs from Identification or Projection
- Feeling that something is wrong
- Responding based upon ‘script’

But Aspies have strong Values - fear offending/hurting but difficult not to.

“One of the problems faced by children with Asperger’s syndrome who use their intellect rather than intuition to succeed in some social situations is that they may be in an almost constant state of alertness and anxiety, leading to a risk of mental and physical exhaustion.”

Tony Attwood

9/28/18
Social anxiety or Social Stress

- Social situation stressful and demanding –
  - like a foreign culture or second language
- Performance anxiety
- Rational and appropriate to be anxious because without ability to read situation, it is legitimately risky

“The fun came from setting up and arranging things. Maybe this desire to organise things rather than play with things, is the reason I never had a great interest in my peers. They always wanted to use the things I had so carefully arranged. They would want to rearrange and redo. They did not let me control the environment.”

Liane Holliday-Willey

Theory of Mind

The ability to attribute mental states—beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc.—to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one's own.
Sally Anne Test

Only 4 out of 20 children with autism got the question correct, compared to 14% Down’s Syndrome and 15% typical.

Mentalising helps us

- Make sense of people’s actions
- Predict their behaviour
- Spot and/or utilise deception
- Experience empathy
- Share and co-operate

Social Strengths

Do have social needs and bring:

- Deep caring and strong sense of social justice
- Honesty and integrity and less superficial
- Strong & loyal bonding - but may seem indifferent
- E.g. need to refresh messages of love and bonding
Shame because human society strongly values social skills and social capital.

Strategies

- Conversation and social skills training
- Social Articles - the psychology of...
- Two's company, three's a crowd
- Easier with older, younger or through special interest
- Encourage family and early childhood friendships
- May also be easier with strangers or very close
- Pets, especially dogs can help

B) Communication
Language Expression

- Precocious and formal use of language
- Pedantic
- Bluntness
  - Minimal non-verbal or para-verbal inc face
  - Minimal affect in language
  - Too much or too little eye contact
- Spoken mostly quite monotone
- Highly detailed pronunciation

Language Interpretation

- Lack of comprehension of facial and bodily non-verbal information
- Lack of understanding of idiom
- Tends to literal interpretation (teasing)
- Difficulties with irony or sarcasm
- But many can work with metaphor

Conversation skills

- Don’t of small talk if not information exchange
- Matching conversation to context
- Appropriate topics
  - Monologues or scripts
  - Reciprocity of interest
- Keeping on track - semantic drift
- When and how to interrupt
- Accepting different points of view
Humour

‘It is not a sense of humour we lack, but rather the social skills to recognize when others are joking, signal that we ourselves are joking, or appreciate jokes which rely on an understanding of social conventions’
(Sainsbury 2000, p.80 from Attwood).

DSM 5: ASD

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history.
1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging,
2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging,
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging,

C) Sensory /Motor
Sensory

- Perceptual sensitivity esp. sound
- Taste/texture of foods
- Hyper/hypo-sensitivity
- tactile e.g. seams, textures, touch
- temperature/pain
- Hunger
- Impacts hygiene and self care e.g. tooth brushing
- Mono-channel

Perception

- Face Blindness
- Auditory discrimination (esp. multiple people talking)
- Synaesthesia

Motor/Coordination

- Clumsy - lack of spatial awareness - poor proprioception
- Physically maladroit
- Often poor ball catching etc
- Signature movement style
Motor/Coordination

- Bodily discomfort / disconnect so restlessness
- Tics / Tourettes
- Bad handwriting - dysgraphia / apraxia

Stimming

- Rocking, flapping, spinning bouncing
- Watching spinning objects or patterns
- Smelling preferred smells
- Touching/rubbing/stroking
- Making or repeating sounds aloud or in head
- Lip biting, picking, head banging
- Manipulating a stim toy or object
- Engaging in a repetitive task (stacking, doodling, cards, maths, listing) (Kim)

Understanding Stimming

- Communication of emotions
- Alleviating anxiety
- Motor tic
- Blocking overload through trance
- To cope with time
Strategies

• Healthy stimming
• Bodily connection activities help e.g. dance or martial arts
• Weighted blankets
• Sensory modulators (e.g. tinted glasses, noise reducing headphones etc)
• Rocking chairs etc

D) Cognition

Cognition

1. Decision making
2. Rigidity of thought
3. Rationality
4. Perseverance
5. Special Interests
6. Processing Style
1. Decision making

- Inability to filter relevant from irrelevant
- Can be overwhelmed by choice
- Challenges planning non-linear projects
- Must get the right “one”
- Procrastination and may contribute to messiness

2. Rigidity of though

- **Routines** - Meals, clothing, diary
- **Rules** - e.g. games or spelling/grammar
- Rules help cope but can be restricting
- Structure & order - not just a cognitive bias but also a coping mechanism.
- "The Plan" - lack of spontaneity - “the ‘no’ reflex” (Km)

3. Rationality

- Logic very important.
- Can be utilitarian
- May in part help make world more navigable.
- Hard to break or bend rules
- Hard to cope with irrational rules or people being illogical
4. Perseverance

- Difficulty multi-tasking (so only focussing upon what they’re facing)
- Deep Concentration
- Disturbed by interruptions
- Can contribute to disorganised and lateness

5. Special Interests

- One or more interests to the exclusion of others
- But have a use by date - hours or years
- Very high levels of expertise
- Includes games, hobbies, but also unhealthy behaviours
- Cataloguing, collecting etc

The most popular special interests of boys with Asperger’s Syndrome are types of transport, specialist areas of science and electronics, particularly computers…

Girls … can be interested in the same topics but clinical experience suggests their special interest can be animals and classic literature… not typically associated with boys.

The interest in animals can be focussed on horses or native animals … however, the intensity and qualitative aspects of the interest are unusual.

Tony Attwood
**Function of Special Interest**

1. To overcome anxiety and provide relaxation
2. To provide pleasure.
3. To help understand the physical world.
4. To create an alternative world.
5. To create a sense of identity.
6. To facilitate conversation

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**6. Processing Style**

- Evolutionarily critical mutation
- Hugely creative problem solving
  - think outside the box (Aspie Superpower)
- But *usually* low imagination -
  - e.g. make up a story (part of difficulty lying)
- Pattern recognition - numbers, systems, etc
- Attention to detail/details
- Thinking in images
- Can be Savant (e.g. date/day, pitch, memory)

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**DSM 5: ASD**

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by *at least two* of the following, currently or by history:

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behaviour
3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus
4. Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment
Emotions

Difficulties with
- Identification - what am i feeling?
- Recognition - what are they feeling?
- Personalisation - is it about me or not?
- Modulation - managing its strength.

The Meltdown

- An intense response due to being overwhelmed
- Can be triggered by:
  - Change I routine
  - Too much choice or information
  - Too much sensory input
  - Too complex social interaction
  - Too much emotional experience

The Meltdown

- Loss of language, executive functioning, and overwhelming emotional discharge
- Want to cry and die
- Not a tantrum, Intermittent Explosive Disorder etc
- May result in withdrawal, self-harm and other unhealthy behaviours
Helpful responses

- Recognise they will always happen, but try to learn what triggers can be avoided, and have a plan for those that can’t
- Learn a couple of rules to help reset after a meltdown

When it occurs

- Disengage from whatever triggered it
- Validate, accept, and be non-judgmental (like the GPS when you take a wrong turning,
- Engage in safe stimming/special interest/grounding behaviours, including deep pressure
- Solitude (except animals) and low sensory,
- Family will need to be briefed on helpful responses.

Service Dogs

- Non-language, attentive and non-judgmental
- Calmly approach when distressed
- Sit at roads
- Block exits
- Tethered to child
- Sit on person when distressed
School

- Early school often positive
- Greater interest in teachers than children
- High achiever especially when younger
- Structure of school can be positive

School

- Very early childhood friends and family remain but few new friends - lonely
- Target of bullying because different/vulnerable
- Easily provoked into a meltdown
- Few peers to protect them
- Things get worse with adolescence as social rules get more complex - can impact grades

Academia

- Generally thrive in post grad university.
- Engage in special interest
- Asperger’s behaviours are more normal
- Peers with shared special interest
- Institution/community holistic support.
Assignments

- clearly defined assessment tasks (e.g. avoid “discuss”)
- allowance of concentration difficulty if not special interest - coaching
- time management prompts due to planning difficulty
- support in group based tasks
- options not to hand-write

Workplace advantages

- Very high expertise if special interest
- Autonomous worker
- Original thinker and problem solver
- Attention to detail
- Good for retention - don’t career hop
- Tend to be honest, ethical and unprejudiced
- Straightforward to manage

Workplace Challenges

May be
- challenges with customer complaints
- difficulties managing staff
- self-planning work activities
- changing practices
- taking illogical instructions
- collaborating with others
Workplace Principles

Can be helpful to have a designated contact / support
1. Pick a role that plays to their special interest and superpowers
2. May need coaching to assist in planning work
3. Reflect and coach around social environment
4. Ensure sensory environment supportive

Romantic Relationship

• Most complex of all social relationships
• Requires verbal, physical & emotional intimacy
• Coaching essential for both so partner knows how to deal with it.

7 Tips

1. Both need to be willing to accept the other’s differences
2. Both need to accept that some needs will have to be met outside the relationship
3. Remember to focus on advantages of ND relationship
4. Risk the NT partner “catches” Asperger’s
5. Be creative around sex & careful with porn
6. Divide responsibilities based upon abilities.
7. Schedule talk time and shared play time
8. Get specialist ND couples coaching
Sex

- Sex drive varies a lot
- Physical sensation can be very unpleasant
- Can seem selfish, Theory of Mind / empathy
- May be more physical than intimacy sex
- Internet / porn very appealing due to lack of social
- Almost no guidance around sex for single aspies
- Safety skills must be taught to more vulnerable

Offending

- No evidence of increased criminality, but may have more contact with Justice System.
- Vulnerable to manipulation to unwittingly offend.
- Sexual/violent offences - rarer media imply
- Can be not getting boundaries / impacts
- Can be fulfilment of special interest. e.g. computer hacking or stalking or arson
- Can make things worse in court and serve longer sentences – poor in front of parole board

Presenting as…

- Anxiety esp Social
- Depression / bipolar
- ADHD
- Offending / IED / Psychopathy
- OCD / OCD PD
- PTSD/ Complex Trauma
- Tourettes
- Schizophrenia
Addiction

- Alcohol and depressants
- Pornography vulnerability
- Computer games
- Gambling – special interest
- Over-eating – body disconnect
- Plus poorly developed inhibition

"When my son was diagnosed as having Asperger's Syndrome, I was able to read some of the literature (and) it soon became apparent where the root source of my own problems lay… At first my reaction… was one of relief at finally having some kind of tangible definition for what I had been feeling all these years. The relief was soon replaced by mixed feelings of remorse, frustration and helplessness. For a while I felt "ripped off". I felt that 40 years of my life had been stolen from me and that, had I known about ASD from the beginning, my life could have been vastly different.

Letter From An Adult Male With Asperger Syndrome
Richard Rowe

Treatment or Coaching?
The Seven Key Points of Neurodiversity

1. The Brain Functions more like an Ecosystem than like a Machine.
2. Brains Exist Along Spectrums of Ability.
3. Competence is Defined Somewhat Subjectively via Culture.
4. The Success of Any Organism is Based on How Well it Adapts to the Needs of the Surrounding Environment.
5. Organisms Must Also be Able to Adapt Their Environments to Succeed.
6. Correct Career and Lifestyle Choices, Assistive Technologies, Human Resources, and Other Strategies to Enhance Quality of Life Ought to be Employed to Alter the Environment.
7. A Healthy, Positive Environment Directly Modifies the Brain, Furthering its Ability to Adapt.

Signs

One can spot such children instantly. They are recognizable from small details, for instance, the way they enter the consulting room at their first visit, their behaviour in the first few moments and the first words they utter.

– Hans Asperger (p68 Frith 1991)

Intervention Focus Areas

1. Identification / Validation / Self-expectations
2. Coming out
3. Trauma work
4. Social, emotional, and cognitive skills coaching / mentoring
5. Sustainable sensitivity strategies
6. Strengths engagement
7. Family/systemic interventions
1. Assessment Areas

- Explore all four key domains
- Explore early childhood, especially pre adolescence.
- Assessment and screening tools not sensitive enough.
- Be careful of confirmation bias – explore differentials.

Resources

- Client Self-Report
- Third party (especially parental) report
- Observation and experience in session

Signs

- Eye contact – too much or too little
- Significantly low affective expression
- Appears rude and non-interactive
- Appears irritated, dissatisfied

Consider differentials and look for evidence across ALL FOUR domains.
Adult Asperger Assessment

More stringent than DSM-IV

2 Quotients:
- Autism Spectrum (AQ) social skill; attention switching; attention to detail; communication; imagination
- and Empathy Quotient (EQ)s.
- Four domains: Social, Obsessions, Communication, Imagination

5 Prerequisites

1. Delays or abnormal functioning in each of A–D occur across development.
2. Clinically significant impairment
3. There is no clinically significant general delay in language
4. There is no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in the development of non-social age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behaviour
5. Criteria are not met for another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder or Schizophrenia.

To label or not?

- In experience people with Asperger’s usually don’t mind being told.
- Identification helps breaks the shame or stress of “what’s wrong with me”
- Sharing diagnosis with others may help
2. Coming Out

- Often can just say “I’m the kind of person who…”
- Who needs to know? Why
- Ask them what they know about Asperger’s
- Tell them you think it may apply to you
- Don’t ‘come out’ as an excuse to avoid trying to fit in to an NT world.

3. Trauma work

- Growing up undiagnosed results in high levels of stress
- Lots of self-blame and wondering
- Bullied / School performance
- Low self esteem /misdiagnosis
- Few role models / external validators
- Hopelessness and helplessness

Acceptance

- Reading books – esp Aspie Biographies
- Youtube clips
- Keeping and ID journal
- Reframing experiences from Aspie lens can continue for years
Intervention Focus Areas

1. Identification / Validation / Self-expectations
2. Coming out
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4. Skills coaching / mentoring
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Counsellor Considerations

- Avoid “how are you feeling” type questions
- Have an agreed structure to sessions
- Sometimes one hour will be too long.
- Here and now feedback and live-play
- Role-play situations
- Don’t try and make them NT - rather teach them how to live in an NT world.