

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

A form of **autism** yet on the more able end of the autistic spectrum. Often with at least average or above average intelligence.

- A difficulty in **communication** (not speech or language). Often with a very wide vocabulary and ability to talk the hind leg off a donkey on a subject of their choosing with little awareness of the reactions of the listener.
- A difficulty in **social relationships**. Often loners who are aware of others friendships but unaware of how to make their own.
- A difficulty with **empathy** and **imagination** – e.g. picking up non-verbal signals from others around them and understanding others actions and reactions.

How is it recognised in a Person Otherwise Academically Able?

They will not look disabled in any way and may give an air of aloof confidence, but this is deceiving. They may :-

- Avoid direct eye contact (but use peripheral vision)
- Avoid shaking hands (or touch in any way)
- Become very uncomfortable with the close proximity of another person when sitting in crowded places (they may seek to sit at the back or side, away from the group)
- Not be aware of facial expressions or body language that enhances or convey meaning whether accompanied by speech or not
- Speak very formal (stilted greetings not followed up spontaneously) and often lacking in tone or rhythm
- Have difficulty asking for help or even recognising the fact that they can ask for help (but they may on their topic argue a point for an extended period to gain clarification)
- Misunderstand or not even be aware of verbal instructions given to a large group in a casual manner
- Answer rhetorical questions in class groups
- Be very literal in their speech and in their responses to what is said to them (very little understanding of colloquial language)

Living with Asperger's Syndrome

Some Areas of Difficulty and Assets Experienced by People with Asperger's Syndrome

- **Difficulty in communicating and interacting with other people** - This can cause major problems as regards personal relationships and with education and employment.
- **Dislike of change and the need to stick to routines** - Many people on the Autistic continuum find it difficult to cope with sudden and unexpected change and often become distressed because of this.
- **Failing to recognise facial expressions and hidden meanings** - Again, this can cause difficulties in dealing with friendships and relationships.
- **Difficulties in recognising jokes and sarcasm and often taking everything literally** - This can cause misunderstandings and embarrassments into social situations.
- General difficulties in perceiving and conforming to the unwritten rules of society.
- **Difficulties in concentration and in interpreting instructions** - This often goes with poor co-ordination and motor skills.
- **Preferring Solitary pursuits** - This can be something of a disadvantage in a society where there is much emphasis on interaction, partnerships and teamwork.

On a More Positive Side :-

- **A good memory for facts** - This can be a useful asset if channelled in the right direction. Probably more of an advantage to the high functioning Autistic person. Those at the more severe end of the continuum may not always have the ability to put this gift to a positive use.
- **Single-mindedness** - Many people in the Autistic continuum have an obsessive interest in a particular subject. Again, this could be an advantage if channelled in the right direction.
- **A talent in one particular subject i.e. music or art** - If this occurs, the autistic person may be at genius level at this one subject but have severe learning difficulties in everyday life.

Helpful Hints for Friends, Colleagues, Relations of People with Asperger's Syndrome

Remember that odd behaviour is generally not deliberate

- Do not expect people to automatically understand something that may be obvious to you. Explain everything to them as simply and clearly as possible
- Try not to be ambiguous when giving group instructions – making requests
- Do not worry too much if they do not contribute to the conversation
- Remember that most Asperger's people do not like change in any form
- Do not make an issue out of situations when they may become angry or agitated, just suggest that they go for a short walk to calm down
- If they do something which is considered anti-social, please explain this to them as tactfully as possible and suggest a better course of action
- Never tease or ridicule people with autism or Asperger's syndrome in any way, they deserve the same respect as anyone else
- Above all please do not look on them as a misfit but an ordinary person with a disability

Helpful Hints for the Person with an Asperger's Syndrome

- Try and learn from people around you
- If you are not sure how to react to what is said to you, practice watching other people and ask for help
- If there is any misunderstanding, apologise and try to clarify things
- When given instructions, try and concentrate very carefully on what the other person is saying, ask them to repeat it again if necessary
- Try and keep your obsessions to yourself
- If you are forced to change your routine, try and develop a new one
- If you feel a tantrum coming on, try and find strategies to deal with it
- If you are not sure whether a joke is being told, it is best not to laugh
- If you are accused of annoying or anti social behaviour, accept the criticism and apologise and try not to do it again
- If you are victimised, try to remember that it is the other persons problem not yours. If it persists, try and talk it over with a sympathetic third party
- Remember that other people also have their problems.

Issues Associated with Asperger's Syndrome

Schools and teachers may have little awareness or knowledge of Asperger's syndrome and not recognise that a distressed pupil has this form of special need. A disturbingly high number of children with autism or Asperger's syndrome are excluded from primary and secondary schools each year.

Teenagers and young adults with Asperger's syndrome will be more likely to have an awareness of their difference to those around them but have no idea how to deal with this feeling of isolation. At worst, the results can be depression and even more isolating behaviour.

Their verbal ability combined with insecurity can lead them into arguing why they do not have to do something, therefore the rules of any situation needs to be made clear right from the start (start as you mean to go on). These rules may need to be written down for referral at any time.

They may rely quite heavily on the familiar presence of a particular teacher, helper or work colleague until they are very familiar with the routine and have gained confidence within the situation. They can then become very reliable, prompt and eager students/employees.

Ideally, they will benefit initially from having the same helper in all situations so that both can get to know the other and a level of trust build up. A different helper each day will be counter-productive.

The inherent lack of empathy of the Asperger's syndrome student/employee and their formal, sometimes abrupt way of communicating may be off putting to someone who does not know them. It will take a special effort on the part of family/friends/teachers/colleagues to get to know the person underneath this front and to help them build a relationship.

Most especially, it must be noted that a young adult with Asperger's syndrome, for all their ability with words, is a very trusting and vulnerable person who takes what is said very literally and this can lead them into possibly distressing or dangerous situations.