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Asperger syndrome: A brief introduction for adults

Do I have Asperger syndrome or does someone I care for have Asperger syndrome?

This leaflet explains some of the signs and symptoms that accompany Asperger syndrome (AS). However it is not a substitute for a proper diagnosis and it is important to get further help and support from your doctor if you think you or someone close to you has AS.

What is Asperger syndrome?

One way people with Asperger syndrome describe themselves is 'neuro-diverse', this is because the way their brains deal with information and as a result, the way they interact with other people is different to 'neuro-typicals' (most of the population). Asperger syndrome has also been described as an 'alternative learning and behaviour style'. The difficulties experienced by people with AS are often hidden from outsiders leading to confusion and misunderstanding.

People with Asperger syndrome can experience great difficulty understanding and reading other people's emotions. As a result people with AS may find it more difficult to read body language, facial expressions and other signals which most of us take for granted. They may find maintaining eye contact difficult, increasing the problems of reading emotions. As a result they may behave in unusual or unpredictable ways. However because people with AS look 'normal', other people expect them to behave like everybody else and are confused and may take it personally when they don't.

Many people with Asperger syndrome learn to live with AS and the advantages it also brings with it, people with AS are often very logical thinkers of above average intelligence. They are very honest, however this sometimes causes problems for the people around them resulting in an un-expected or even angry reaction. This can be stressful and distressing to the person with AS, who, as a caring and friendly person did not expect such a reaction.

Many people with AS become experts in a particular area usually called a 'special interest', these may include, computing, nature, trains, and maths amongst many, many others. Having said that, some people find numbers or maths particularly difficult to deal with (dyscalculia), and may have reading difficulties or dyslexia. They may also experience dysgraphia (difficulty with writing), and disfluency (difficulty speaking) particularly when under stress.

A person with Asperger syndrome can find some things in life very challenging. They find themselves excluded from many areas of society and are prime targets for teasing or bullying, not only in school but sometimes in the workplace as well. People of all ages may find they are treated with little sympathy.

A person with AS may find forming relationships and friendships a problem and need help to understand things like shyness and the emotions the rest of the world takes for granted. Although people with AS find it hard to be sociable, they often crave a normal social life.

Unlike classical autism where someone is so wrapped up in their own world they are unable to communicate, people with AS may speak very fluently, though sometimes the words may sound rather formal or stilted. Some people repeat back the words they have just heard or perhaps heard at another time (this is called echolalia) and as mentioned above, some people with Asperger syndrome feel uncomfortable looking at people when they talk to them. Many people with AS feel uncomfortable shaking hands, or making close contact with people.

People with AS may have low self esteem, they may forget to take care of themselves and some may experience depression, eating problems, obsessive compulsive behaviour and other mental health problems, sometimes even feeling suicidal. They can appear lazy or seem to act in a difficult, even obstructive manner and their frustration with the world can easily lead to annoyance, shouting and temper outbursts. It can be hard to remember it is the Asperger syndrome causing the problem and not the person.

Estimates from recent scientific studies show that about four people in a thousand have AS and another three or four have other autistic spectrum disorders. The majority are male, however there are many females affected by Asperger syndrome.

So far no single cause for AS has been identified. Research has identified a number of things that can affect brain development including links with genetics, the way our bodies deal with vitamins and problems resulting from a difficult pregnancy or birth. It is not caused by the way you were brought up, but this may affect the ways you cope with it.

Early diagnosis is important.

If you are concerned that you, or someone you care about may have Asperger syndrome then talking to a doctor about your concerns is important. Young people and adults still in education may find this opens the door to help and support that they wouldn't otherwise be able to access. The process of being referred to a specialist may take some time so be prepared for a delay. Asperger East Anglia may be able to assist if your doctor has problems finding a specialist, however it may be very difficult to find an NHS specialist in your area.

The specialist will look at a number of things including difficulties in communication, difficulties in social relationships and flexibility of imagination.

If some of these things apply to you this may also indicate Asperger syndrome...

- You have difficulties in making and keeping friends even when it's important to you.
- You may take the things people say literally or have to work out what they mean. For example a phrase like '*pushing the envelope*' might be difficult to understand or make sense of.
- You often don't 'get' jokes, although you may have a good sense of humour.
- You are extremely interested in a particular subject.
- You have an exceptional long term memory for events and facts.
- As a child you didn't feel comfortable playing with other children.
- You find change upsetting and prefer things you are familiar with.
- You like routine and have particular ways of doing things that make you feel comfortable.
- Sometimes you are clumsy and may feel as if your arms and legs are not under control.
- Other people say you have strange or eccentric habits.
- Some people say you are arrogant.
- You feel anxious in social situations.
- People say that you make strange faces or move your hands in a strange way.
- You find it easier to talk than to listen, and think 'small talk' is pointless.
- You feel other people are insensitive to your feelings even though some people say you are insensitive to them and their feelings.
- People around you say you lack imagination, but you know your imagination just works differently.
- You find money or financial issues difficult to understand or control.
- You find it hard to make decisions and choices, or to start something new and unfamiliar.
- You find it easier to hide or ignore problems rather than deal with them or seek help.
- You change the subject if someone asks you a difficult question.
- When given new instructions or information you may need it to be repeated, or be presented in another form to understand it properly

How long does it last?

Asperger Syndrome is a lifelong condition, however with some help and assistance many people are able to make good use of their different abilities and lead interesting and rewarding lives. Appropriate education and support from people who understand AS can help to make life less challenging. Some people find that counselling and other talking therapies are helpful, however it is important that the counsellor or therapist really understands AS and this should be investigated before beginning a course of therapy.

Why is it called Asperger syndrome?

In 1944 Dr Hans Asperger (pronounced with a hard G) from Austria published a paper that distinguished those people on the autistic spectrum with higher levels of intelligence and good speech ability from those who remained withdrawn and had great difficulty communicating. People then began to talk about 'Asperger syndrome' because although it had been affecting people for hundreds of years he was the first person to study and write about these differences. In books or websites from America you may see it called Asperger's Disorder or Asperger's syndrome.

Where can I find out more?

There are a number of books on the subject and your local library can help you to get hold of some. One well known author and expert in this field is psychologist Tony Attwood. Jessica Kingsley is a well respected publisher with a number of books on AS by different authors. Search the internet or contact the Adult Services Team at Asperger East Anglia for a booklist.

Asperger East Anglia

Asperger East Anglia has a website at www.asperger.org.uk where you can find out more about asperger syndrome. As well as teams to support parents and carers, and children in education, they have an Adult Services Team that may be able to help both people with AS and their carers with information and advice on further education, employment and housing as well as helping to develop social skills.

If you become a member of Asperger East Anglia you will get a regular newsletter and free access to the social groups we are developing in the region. If you would like more information about the services Asperger East Anglia has to offer or think we could help in any way please contact us.

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