

A short guide to Asperger Syndrome

What is Aspergers?

Asperger Syndrome is sometimes referred to as able autism or high functioning autism. It includes people of average to high or very high intelligence and is a part of the 'triad of impairments' that typifies autism. The triad refers to the impairments of communication, social interaction and social imagination. It is a lifelong neurological brain condition and not a mental illness although there is a high risk of mental health deterioration if life becomes too difficult without anyone understanding the underlying reason.

Aspergers is often described as a 'hidden' disorder as it cannot be identified by appearance, only behaviour.

For people with Aspergers often their main problem is in their apparent independence, which belies their social disability. Some can manage well in certain areas, whilst having unexpected gaps in ability in others, and the mismatch of intelligence and performance can easily lead to a misunderstanding of the person with Aspergers. They can seem clever and articulate but frequently misunderstand the expectations of others and what their own expectations of people and services should be.

In some cases individuals are not diagnosed until adulthood and often have to cope without support or any understanding of the condition. This can lead to other problems, such as depression and anxiety as well as difficulties in the workplace, difficulties with their tenancies, etc. They are likely to have no friends and to be socially very isolated. Although they may desperately want friends and relationships many will settle for a lonely but 'safe' life if they can find the right environment.

Although individuals with Aspergers vary enormously in the way their condition affects them and in their ability to hide or overcome their problems, there are some common features.

Common Features...

- Topics of conversation may be limited to own interests and be very repetitive.
- Inability to pick up on verbal clues and hints and to understand and use facial expression, body language or eye contact appropriately.
- Little insight into the unwritten rules of human relationships. May lack empathy with other people and appear rude, selfish or tactless. Seem to lack understanding of how people affect and influence each other.
- Social situations can cause extreme anxiety, linked to an awareness of being different and not fitting in, fear of failure, being misunderstood or not being able to understand what others expect.
- Change, especially unplanned change, is experienced as very stressful. Predictable, repetitive lifestyle and activities provide reassurance.
- High motivation and knowledge in own field of special interest, sometimes to the point of obsession. Can be useful if manage to get through the education system.

- Good attention to detail but great difficulty in seeing ‘the bigger picture’ because this requires flexible and abstract thinking, which they find difficult.
- Difficulty in predicting the consequences of their actions and putting things into context.
- Difficulties with planning and time management, due to anxiety when working under pressure and a perfectionist streak. Same difficulties with organisation.

A long time sometimes needed to allow the individual to process information; and making choices can be extremely hard – linked to information overload and inability to predict the outcomes of actions.

- Poor spatial awareness, motor skills and co-ordination may also be associated. ADHD and dyspraxia can be associated.

Sensory sensitivity – people can be extremely sensitive to specific sensory stimuli (vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch) and therefore, to environment. It is important to think about the senses when interacting with people. They may find even the lightest touch painful; or may have very high pain threshold so unaware if injured. Can be easily overloaded with sensory information in busy places – and how it is dealt with depends on the individual. It can trigger a fight or flight reaction. Some may withdraw, place their fingers in their ears, some may talk incessantly, repetitive questioning etc – all these behaviours help to calm the individual.

What can help?

Lack of understanding causes many of the difficulties associated with Aspergers. High intellect and excellent articulation often mask real understanding as people with Aspergers have extreme difficulty in making sense of their worlds. Once the condition and its effects are understood, the individual can concentrate on overcoming the negative aspects and making the most of the positive. Qualities like honesty, reliability, determination and dedication are associated with the condition, and many people show talent in the creative arts as well as maths, music, computing, science and technology.

Support

Getting the right type and amount of support is vital as are early interventions when something is causing stress is vital. Stress may be caused only by a letter from the Council or the NHS or it may be an interaction with a neighbour, too much noise in the workplace ... but once problems occur, anxiety can overtake, issues become exaggerated and become much harder to deal with. Stress leads occasionally to inappropriate behaviour which can feel challenging.

Figures speak for themselves.

80% of adults with Aspergers are unemployed despite having work skills, qualifications and motivation.

Adults with Aspergers are also 7 times more likely to come into contact with the police than neuro-typical adults – as victims, perpetrators or both – and even both at the same time.

In the words of one DASH client – *“how can I survive in a world that perceives me as difficult at best, dangerous at worst when I am the one who is frightened all the time and don't understand what it is I do wrong?” ‘I feel like an alien’*

In partnership with DASH and Swindon branch of the National Autistic Society, Wiltshire Constabulary launched the Autism Alert Card to help people when they are in difficulties.

Advocacy and timely, practical support with underpinning knowledge of Aspergers can avert crises.

Structure

Written or other visual information may be helpful for the individual to cope with possible change, and a structured environment may help to make events more understandable and predictable. Meeting someone in their own home and bullet point information to leave with them, helps even the most intelligent of Aspies.

Consistency

There needs to be regular monitoring of possible difficulties, to prevent anxiety. With the right support and a tolerant environment, people with Asperger Syndrome can develop their skills and be helped to find their own ways of adapting to society's demands, making the most of their different way of viewing the world. There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that low cost interventions that are timely and skilled, offer great value for money in terms of outcomes.

Further information about Aspergers can be found at the following:

Swindon Autism Information & Advice Service: email: info@dashswindon.com or call 07554 665 715 or visit DASH website on www.dashswindon.com

Swindon & District Branch of the National Autistic Society: 01793 770079 or email swindon@nas.org.uk

[Sue Smith of SEQOL](#) : Principal Health Lead/Professional Lead for Autism in Swindon. The Orbital, North Swindon District Centre, Thamesdown Drive, SN25 4AN

Tel: 463333 option 1 or DD:464316

Autism Alert Wiltshire
www.autismalertwilts.com

The National Autistic Society: Autism Helpline: 0808 800 4104
www.nas.org.uk