

What is Asperger Syndrome?

A description of some of the main characteristics of Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome is characterised diagnostically by three main areas of difference from expected norms of behaviour; social interaction, communication and language and lack of flexibility in thought and behaviour. Environmental sensitivity, although not mentioned specifically in the various diagnostic criteria for Asperger Syndrome, are often said to feature as a factor for the majority of those with these conditions. Some adults were asked what the main effects of having Asperger Syndrome on them were. These are a selection of responses to show the diversity of the condition beneath the umbrella terms of the diagnostic criteria.:

Poor interaction with people, leading to social isolation, depression, lethargy and lack of ambition – male with Asperger Syndrome.

Lifelong difficulty making sense of what people get up to in their everyday lives and careers. Solitary habits..., persistent and obsessive involvement in my own troubles and concerns – male with Asperger Syndrome.

I can be aloof if I am worried that people do not want me to interact with them. I find it hard to cope with unpredictability – female with Asperger Syndrome.

He doesn't like large social gatherings... finds it difficult to figure why other people think as they do, has tantrums... - wife of male with Asperger Syndrome.

Mental exhaustion trying to figure out life, relationships and social dynamics and consequences; three mental breakdowns, two in the past five years. Lifelong depressive behaviour – male with Asperger Syndrome.

Difficult to say. I tend to be my own person, but have problems of stress and anxiety fairly frequently – male with Asperger Syndrome.

Ultimately, breakdown of my marriage and abandonment of my professional life – male with Asperger Syndrome.

Further examples of how a person may exhibit the aspects of this complex condition are as follows:

Social Interaction

- Differences in the ability to read social cues, which others seem to intuitively 'know'.
- May appear to be naïve, tactless or stupid by doing the 'wrong' thing socially.
- Difficulty appreciating thoughts, feelings and opinions of other people as being potentially different to one's own.
- Failing to adhere to social rules which often results in ridicule, aggression or exclusion.

Someone with Asperger Syndrome may typically appear to be awkward in social situations, not picking up on unspoken 'rules'. They may behave in a socially inappropriate way and find it hard to understand why their behaviour has offended or bothered others. For example, someone might mention how much weight a female colleague has put on recently or speak very loudly about a personal issue and not be able to consider that others may find sensitive topics uncomfortable – he/she would only be able to see the matter from their own viewpoint.

Communication and Language

- Reading non-verbal signals, body language and facial expression.
- Understanding subtleties of humour, sub-text and non-literal meanings of spoken language.

- Needing very precise instructions and not being overloaded with information.
- Failing to accurately communicate resulting in misunderstanding, stress and exclusion.

A person with Asperger Syndrome may find the language and emotions on the face difficult to 'read'. They may struggle to make eye contact, finding it pointless or overwhelming. Their language may be very pedantic and literal, communicating in a very precise manner. They may also require information to be presented to them in a similarly detailed and exact way in order for it to be understood. If the understanding is not there, the person may be paralysed and have no idea what to do or how to react. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, stupidity and low confidence. Their thinking tends to be logical and decisions are based on rational thought rather than emotions or feelings.

Lack of flexibility in thought and behaviour

- A need for own routines and preferred ways of doing things.
- Limited interests and conversational topics.
- Dislike of change, variety, surprises and spontaneity.
- Rigid thought patterns which find new concepts, planning, consequences and abstract thought difficult.
- Inability to tolerate flexibility can be stressful, anxiety-provoking and create difficulties within social relationships as the person may be seen as selfish and uncaring of others' needs.
- Black and white thinking – seeing only one or two options to any situation, an all-or-nothing approach to life with a difficulty to perceive other options or degrees.

Managing unpredictable situations or changes to routines can be very stress-provoking for someone with Asperger Syndrome. Due to their reduced ability to understand all of the social interactions around them, they may cling to safe, known situations and routines in order to maintain a sense of control and familiarity in a world which feels chaotic and illogical. This can result in a narrow focus in both thought and action where the individual is unable to consider other perspectives or behaviours outside that which is already known. The person may, for example, insist on eating the same food every day, sit in the same seat on the bus and become agitated when this is not possible and find it difficult to manage changes at work or home. The tendency towards black and white thinking may result in unrealistic choices and perspectives. For example, someone in a relationship may feel that the relationship must be perfect and that any disagreement is a sign that it is a failure and should be abandoned. If it's not perfect; it must be terrible is the thinking and the ability to consider other more positive aspects are less developed.

Environmental Sensitivity

- Limited range of tolerance for certain noises, smells, textures, physical touch.
- Need and strong preference for certain noises, smells, textures, physical touch.
- Inability to tolerate/do without certain stimuli can result in isolation and withdrawal from environmental stressors.

Environments which are too stressful may be avoided by the person with Asperger Syndrome, as the sensory input is just too overwhelming for them to manage. If avoidance is not an option, (because it is the workplace for example) other coping strategies may be put into place. Alcohol may be one of the options for managing this stress and confusion. For some, the effort of coping with a working environment that they find difficult means that there is no spare energy to manage a social life or outside activities as well; the effects of any individual

stressors being cumulative. The remainder of the person's time is spent alone, 'recharging' from the day.

Awareness of your differences in each of these areas – usually learned from the reactions of others - can cause anxiety, stress and depression.

© Sarah Hendrickx www.asperger-training.com