

ACCEPTING ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

THIS IS A CRASH COURSE TO ACCEPTING YOUR ASPERGER'S!

Hey you, over there! Have you always felt like you are different from everyone else around you?

The odd one out, never able to fit in?

Have you always wondered why you could never relate to your peers? Did you have trouble making conversation when it seemed everyone else was laughing and carrying about so easily? Did you always want friends, but were never able to make them? Or maybe you never wanted friends and other people thought this was weird?

Does being around lots of people make you nervous, do loud noises make you jump, do certain smells make you want to make a hasty retreat to the nearest exit?

Have people told you that you are smart and that you could do anything if you just tried? Do you wonder why you are so good at some things but have so much difficulty with other, seemingly very simple tasks? Has anybody called you oblivious, or said that you have no common sense?

Do you like to think deeply, and hate superficial conversations and small talk?

THEN YOU ARE IN THE RIGHT PLACE!

You may be overwhelmed by a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome at first. You may be thinking, "This isn't me, this can't possibly be me." You hear the word "autism," and all you can think of is some Rain Man-like character sitting in the corner, nonverbal, and rocking back and forth. You can't believe they think you're like that.

But what you don't know, or may not realize at this point, is that autism is a spectrum disorder. This means that people have very widely varying levels of difficulties, strengths and weaknesses. One person with an autism spectrum disorder (which includes Asperger's) is nothing like another. Many people on all ends of the autistic spectrum lead very successful, independent, highly functioning lives. And many count their Asperger's to be a blessing, because it does lend certain strengths to us that others do not have.

We have great abilities for focus. We can concentrate on things that interest us to the exclusion of all else, and learn material and faster and better than any of our peers. Most people with AS have great memories. Our special interests can lead to lucrative job offers when we're older. Let's face it, we play by the rules of the adult world, long before we're adults. This may make us outcasts when we're younger but gives us an edge ahead when we get older. We're honest, we're loyal, we follow the rules. More importantly, we can think outside the box. Why would you want to be like everyone else in a country of 300 million sheep? That would be so boring. We aren't bound by the rules of what clothes to wear, making people like us, trying to adhere to thousands of seemingly useless and bizarre social rules. We, as Aspies, are the people who will find the cure for cancer, create artworks of dazzling brilliance and importance, and push the frontiers of our time and develop amazing new technologies that will benefit everyone. They say Bill Gates is an Aspie. Einstein, Thomas Jefferson, Andy Warhol - all people who have

made great contributions to society and have also been suspected to be on the autistic spectrum. This is because we see what's possible and say "why not?", not "What will other people think?"

But not every Aspie has to do something amazing to be amazing.

We can offer wonderful friendship - yes, friendship - because when we care about someone, we do it with a love so genuine, a concern so pure, that we are able to enrich the world just by being in it. It may sound self-congratulatory, but all of the Aspies I have ever known have shown me in one way or another what it means to really care for someone, what it means to be a friend. The Aspies I've known are the first to ask what's wrong when I'm upset, the first to consider my needs when the music is too loud or I'm overwhelmed. They are the ones who ask with complete sincerity how my day was, and really care about the response. Who wouldn't want a friend like that? Some of us may be the silent type. We don't like to talk much, but we are still grateful for our friends and let them know it.

I'll be completely honest with you. Asperger's is far from a party in a box. It sucks not to have any friends when you're growing up, or to have difficulty making friends later on when you grow up and move away to a new place. It is completely isolating and depressing many times. It can be the worst sensation in the world to watch others figuring out how to be part of their world and for you to just not "get it." To watch the closeness that others seem to have and to want it so bad that you feel like you can't breathe, until you distract yourself and go off and play by yourself... while trying to swallow your feelings of bitterness to those who seem like they have it so easy. But this is not the stuff that makes a happy life. I think you know that already. You need to seek out the other quirky people and try to develop friendships with them. You need to find other AS people, and hopefully you can find more friendship and connection with them. You need to follow your interests, and join clubs or organizations dedicated to them so that you can have some sense of connection. You need to make a new set of values for yourself: if social connection is what you desire, then you'll get as much of it as you can with the tools that you have, and try to accept whatever you cannot get. Try to feel this need with other things that you enjoy in life, whether it be foreign films, the joy of chocolate, archaeology, or music. The only thing left to do is trust that your social connections will increase as you gain more life experience and skills. To trust that you WILL find people who appreciate you for the wonderful person you are, strengths, weaknesses, quirks and all. After all, there are more than six billion people on this planet of ours. How can you say you'll never meet someone you connect with until you've met them all?

I'll let you in on one more secret before I go. I'm not there yet, either. Accepting what this thing called Asperger's Syndrome means for our lives in all of its entirety is a daunting task. Resenting what we could have been, a constant embarrassment at not doing things right, this can be hard to live with. It's the good comments I try to remember when I'm doubting myself. Comments like "You're a breath of fresh air," "I've never been able to talk to anyone this easily," and, one time when I was dancing on the empty outdoor patio by my college cafe, "That was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." I'm still trying to figure out my place in this world. I'm trying to figure out how I can get what I need, what makes me happy, and what is meaningful to me. We're all on this journey together. Why don't you come along for the ride with me?