

My Experience with Asperger Syndrome

by Alexander Plank

I am 15. "Having a dash of autism," is how author Uta Frith describes individuals with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Twenty to twenty-five people per 10,000 have AS. I am using my own experiences with having Asperger's Syndrome to help people better understand me and other people with this mild form of Autism.

Hans Asperger, an Austrian pediatrician, published the first definition of Asperger's Syndrome in 1944. He identified a pattern of behavior and abilities that he saw mostly in boys. The pattern included "a lack of empathy, little ability to form friendships, one-sided conversation, intense absorption in a special interest and clumsy movements." (Attwood p. 11) Asperger called children with AS "little professors" because of their ability to talk about a subject with such detail. Asperger died in 1980 before Asperger's Syndrome became widely recognized. The first person to use the term "Asperger's Syndrome" in a paper was Lorna Wing. Her paper was published in 1981. Asperger's work was not internationally recognized until the 1990's.

Asperger's Syndrome is a form of autism. People with AS usually have normal or above normal IQ's. AS is a pervasive development disorder. It is described as an inability to understand how to interact socially. Many adults with Asperger's go without being diagnosed. In fact, an estimated 30-50% of adults with Asperger's have not been diagnosed. People usually are not diagnosed with Asperger's until school because of social interactions.

AS is usually diagnosed by a psychiatrist. The first stage in diagnosing the syndrome is using a scale. In the scale numbers are used to describe how frequently certain AS characteristics occur in a person. The second stage is diagnostic assessment, which usually takes an hour or more. In this second stage, a clinician examines the behavior of the patient. The clinician also looks at information from parents, teachers, and therapists. Other skills examined include language, speech, learning ability, and movement.

People with AS have certain characteristics. The characteristics which I will discuss below are defined by the American Psychiatric Association in the fourth edition of its diagnostic manual, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).[1] AS comes under the category of pervasive developmental disorders.

A. Qualitative impairment in social interaction.

Examples of impairment in social interactions include 1) problems with non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact, facial expression, body posture, and gestures; 2) failure to develop age-appropriate relationships; 3) lack of interest in sharing interests or achievements with other people; and 4) lack of emotional or social reciprocity.

People with AS usually do not talk with people. They talk at people. Conversations are usually one-sided. People think that AS people are being rude on purpose. People with AS are not trying to be rude. They do not realize that they are doing this. They do not understand how people interact.

Children and adults with Asperger's Syndrome tend to interrupt frequently. They have a hard time understanding social cues that tell them when it is their turn. Sometimes they see two people talking about something they are interested and automatically think its ok to just join the conversation because they know about the subject of which the people are talking.

AS children frequently make comments that are very irrelevant. This is because they blurt out the first thing that comes to their mind. People think that this is odd, but is important to remember that they do not understand that it is important to keep some of their thoughts in their heads.

B. Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior interests and activities

Examples of this include at least one of the following impairments. 1) Preoccupation with one or more patterns of interest, which is abnormal in either intensity or focus. 2) Apparently inflexible adherence to routines, which are non-functional. 3) Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerism (hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements) 4) preoccupation with parts of objects.

Another characteristic of a person with Asperger's Syndrome is that he or she frequently gets obsessed with things for a certain amount of time and then move to another subject. My friends call these obsessions "phases" because I grow out of them. They who have Asperger's Syndrome spend all their time doing things to satisfy their interest in their obsessions. As I mentioned before, they talk at people. This talking at people is most frequently seen in conversations about the subject that they are obsessed about.

In addition to being obsessed about something, Children with AS tend to make rapid movements with parts of their bodies. When I was younger, I always spun my arms, flapped my hands, and twirled my body.

C. The disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of functioning. The biggest problem for me is that I am misunderstood by teachers and other people. They think I am purposely being rude, or being lazy (as with my handwriting). They think that I don't care about things. I do care. I just don't understand. I am not trying to make people's life hard. In addition, I misinterpret things that people say and get my feelings hurt. People don't see a wheelchair or any other visual sign of disability so they assume nothing is wrong with me.

D. There is no clinically significant general delay in language.

E. There is no clinically significant delay in development of age-appropriate skills (other than in social interaction).

Other Things Associated with AS

Another symptom of AS is motor clumsiness. AS people tend to bump into things more often than other people do. In addition, handwriting can be terrible. Their handwriting usually consists of mixed cursive/print letters and mixed upper/lowercase letters. I have such bad handwriting, that I have to carry around a keyboard and a palm pilot to type most of my assignments. This "different" handwriting is caused by Dysgraphia.

Some people with Asperger's Syndrome demonstrate extremely odd posture. For example, I usually sit with my feet on the chair. I sit like that so much that I don't notice it. In fact, I am sitting on my chair in Indian style as I write this.

Also, AS causes a person with it to be irritated by certain by certain sounds, textures, tastes, and even smells. I sometimes get so irritated by the high-pitched whistle of my computer monitor, that I want to (or even do) scream. I hate the texture of jeans, which is why I don't own a single pair of them. Some foods I cant eat at all. Its not always that they taste bad but sometimes it is the smell of foods that makes me so irritated. I can't eat Orville Redenbacher microwave popcorn because of its terrible smell.

Another feature that has to do with hearing is the inability to focus on something when there is background noise. I sometimes get so distracted when I read where other people are, that I just read the words and I don't even know what is happening in the book. I then have to go back to where I was before I was sidetracked.

There are actually some benefits to this disorder. If you have it, you usually are very bright. In addition, having it makes you very resistant to peer pressure. You do not care what others want you to do if you do not want to do it.

I am fine with having Asperger's Syndrome. If I had a choice of not having it, I wouldn't change. I like who I am and I do not want to change it. I think AS makes me a stronger person.

[1] Note: the nomenclature used in the DSM-IV to described Asperger's is "disorder." However, people also describe the same condition using "syndrome."