Understanding Asperger Syndrome in Adults

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Asperger syndrome (AS) is a neurodevelopmental disorder predominantly characterized by difficulty in social interactions and communication. Other symptoms include difficulty understanding non-verbal cues, difficulty with eye contact, fixations on a particular subject, difficulty in understanding abstraction, and sensory issues (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The fifth edition of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), published in 2013, made changes to the criteria for autism, including Asperger Syndrome under the category of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). AS falls on the high functioning end of the spectrum (Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010). I am writing this paper to educate people about Asperger’s syndrome in adults and to encourage people with the disorder that they are not alone. I am writing this paper because I live with AS.

Autism spectrum disorders, including Asperger syndrome, have become more prevalent in recent years, yet they are still often misunderstood (Attwood, 2007). Autism is sometimes stereotyped as people who are non-verbal, low intelligence, and disconnected from the world. While that is sometimes the case, most people on the autism spectrum do not fit this stereotype (Attwood, 2007). People on the high functioning end of the spectrum, including Asperger’s, generally have average or above average intelligence. Despite their high intelligence, they have certain areas in which they have much difficulty (Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010).

The primary area that people with Asperger syndrome have difficulty is with social interaction and communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010). They often have difficulty making friends and forming relationships. They have difficulty looking people in the eye (Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010). As a result, others might think they are lying or being dishonest, even though they are not (Simone, 2010). They often
have difficulty understanding non-verbal cues, difficulty reading facial expressions, and difficulty understanding jokes and metaphors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010). People with Asperger’s often want to fit in and have friends, but it is difficult for them. Some mimic the behaviors of others to appear more “normal” (Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010). As a child I always knew I was different from my peers. I didn’t have any friends and was bullied a lot. People thought I was weird. I would always be watching others and try to mimic their behaviors because I wanted to fit in. I also rehearsed what I was going to say, which I still do today as an adult. Sometimes it feels like I am acting in a play. It doesn’t feel natural to me at all. Sometimes when people first meet me and talk to me they think I have low intelligence. When I write, I think, my true level of intelligence comes out. I also feel more comfortable talking to someone one-on-one than talking to a group of people. “In a group setting, the person’s intellectual capacity may not be sufficient to cope with the social interactions of several participants, and the person may take longer to process social information that is normally communicated more quickly in a group than individually” (Attwood, 2007, p. 56). I often can’t keep up with the conversation, and as a result I get very anxious and often say things that I don’t mean to or at inappropriate times.

People with Asperger’s, despite their high intelligence, will sometimes have some form of learning disability, such as dyslexia (Simone, 2010). Many also have a sensory processing disorder, making it difficult for them to learn in a classroom. People with sensory processing disorders over- or under-react to sensory input, such as sounds, sights, smells, and touch (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Attwood, 2007; Dunn, Saiter, & Rinner, 2002; Grandin, 2013; Simone, 2010). As a result, students are often misunderstood by teachers and counselors and not given the support they need to reach their full ability and potential (Simone,
2010). I was often misunderstood in school. When I was in school I did not yet have an Asperger syndrome diagnosis, but no one, not my teachers, counselors, or my family believed that I was intelligent and that I would be able to achieve much. From Kindergarten through high school, I was placed in special education classes and went through speech therapy. I always wanted to be given a chance to prove that I could be successful and that I wasn’t stupid, but I was not given the opportunity. When my peers were applying to colleges, I was discouraged from applying and told that I would never be able to succeed in college. Years later, in my late 20’s, I decided to try college and I found out that what everyone told me was wrong. I could do it and have managed to be quite successful academically.

People on the autism spectrum often have things that they are exceptional at, and other things that they really struggle with. Some people have a savant skill in one specific area (Simone, 2007). Temple Grandin (2013) says that while people on the spectrum need to work on the areas where they show weakness, they should focus on the area in which they have exceptional talent, because they may be able to use that skill when choosing a career. Receiving a diagnosis has helped me to understand myself better and my strengths and weakness. I am still discovering a lot about myself and who I am. I have a hard time knowing where my strengths lie and what I can do with my strengths. I have discovered, through some testing, that my visual-spatial reasoning skills are above average, which has made me quite good at solving puzzles. I think it has also helped me in certain games such as Scrabble. I don’t have a particularly high vocabulary, but I can see how the Scrabble tiles fit together.

People on the autism spectrum also experience meltdowns. Meltdowns are usually brought on by too much or too little sensory input. They can also be caused when the person has high anxiety (Simone, 2010). Some things that trigger a meltdown for me is too much sensory
input, such as when I am sitting in a classroom, trying to get work done, and I hear multiple conversations going on around me, and at the same time, papers are rustling, pens are clicking, etc. Another situation that triggers a meltdown for me is after I have been at a party or other social gathering, which causes a lot of sensory overload. Other situations that may cause me to have meltdowns are changes to my routine or schedule. I have experienced meltdowns since I was a child, and still do as an adult. When I have a meltdown I might yell, hit myself, hit my head against the floor or wall, hit others, punch holes through the wall, etc. It is exhausting for me when this happens and takes awhile to recover from it.

People with autism also engage in repetitive behavior called “stimming,” or self-stimulatory behavior. These behaviors can include rocking, swaying, hand flapping, spinning (yourself or objects), or finger flicking. This behavior usually occurs when someone is pushing our buttons, anxiety caused by boredom, sensory over- and under-load, and anxiety in social situations (Grandin, 2013; Simone, 2010). Some of the behaviors that I have engaged in are shaking my legs, rubbing my hands together, rocking, and spinning. It helps me deal with my anxiety. As an adult I have learned what kind of behaviors make me look weird to other people. Therefore, I try to engage in behaviors that will help with my anxiety, yet not make me look too weird or odd. Some activities that help me are riding on a motorcycle, bouncing on a trampoline, and riding a rollercoaster.

An increasing number of adults are being diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, as it is often overlooked in childhood. Adults have many of the same traits as children with AS, but also have their own set of struggles that comes with being an adult on the spectrum (Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010). Just as children on the spectrum, adults often find that they have trouble with friendships and relationships. They have a difficult time with the reciprocity that is necessary in a
relationship. Despite their intellect and abilities, many have a difficult time holding a job. They may struggle in the work place because they have a difficult time interacting with people (Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010) Some people, like myself, might have a difficult time following step-by-step directions, unless they are written down. Adults also experience meltdown. Adults are sometimes more likely to control their behavior in public than children, because they have learned what is and isn’t appropriate behavior in society. They are more likely to be able to control when and where a meltdown takes place. Even so, it is still difficult to control and can come out of nowhere, without warning (Simone, 2010).

Women and girls are especially misunderstood and under diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. There are several reasons why. First, women often have more of a desire to have friends and relationships. Friends of girls with Asperger’s often help them cope in social situations. Also, girls often come across as shy, when it is really that they do not know how to interact in social situations, which is what happened to me. This makes the Asperger’s traits harder to detect in girls. Women and girls are also often misdiagnosed. I was diagnosed with many different disorders such as ADHD, borderline personality disorder, an eating disorder, bipolar, depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and other psychiatric disorders. Many of these disorders never quite fit. When I got an Asperger’s diagnosis, I knew it fit me. People on the autism spectrum often have comorbid disorders along with their autism, such as ADHD and sensory processing disorder. Studies have shown that there is also a correlation between autistic traits and eating disorders. Also, girls on the spectrum often enjoy many of the same things as neurotypical girls, such as horses. The difference is the level of fixation on the particular subject (Attwood, 2007; Simone, 2010).
Getting a diagnosis was very beneficial for me. All my life I knew I was different, but wasn’t sure why. Getting a diagnosis helped me to understand why I am the way I am. Everything I have experienced in my life makes sense now. Also, when people know I have Asperger’s, they don’t perceive me as weird anymore, because there is a reason for my behavior. There are still some people who aren’t so accepting, but, overall, people accept me more now because they understand. Getting a diagnosis has also helped me to get accommodations for school. Living with Asperger’s isn’t always easy, but there are many positive things about it, such as our attention to detail, our logical thinking, and some of the skills we possess. Temple Grandin (2013) says, “Too much of a trait causes severe disability, but a little bit can provide an advantage” (p. viii). Living with an autism spectrum disorder has its challenges, because we think differently than neurotypicals, but many people with autism have achieved great things as a result. There are some famous people throughout history that, if diagnosed today, would fall somewhere on the autism spectrum, such as Albert Einstein, Vincent Van Gogh, Andy Warhol, Isaac Newton, Amadeus Mozart, Jane Austin and others. These people are scientists, engineers, inventers, poets, writers, musicians, artists, etc., with brilliant and creative minds, who have had a big impact on our society.
References


