

Asperger syndrome is part of the autism spectrum. This information sheet details how people with Asperger syndrome may experience the core features of autism.

Asperger syndrome used to be a diagnosis in its own right but in recent years it has been brought under the one diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. This means that children and adults who receive a diagnosis now are rarely diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome but receive the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. However there are many children and adults who were previously diagnosed with Asperger syndrome and their diagnosis does not change.

Like everyone else on the autism spectrum, people with Asperger syndrome may show the following core features:

- Challenges with social communication, especially 'non-verbal'
- Differences in social interaction
- Inflexible thinking
- Sensory issues

People with Asperger syndrome tend to have average to above average intelligence, and usually receive the diagnosis because there is no obvious delay in language development.

Use of language

People with Asperger syndrome may have difficulty in knowing how language is used in different situations. They might find sarcasm and certain 'sayings' confusing because what is said isn't always what is meant.

Some people with Asperger syndrome have a very good vocabulary but may not be aware of how to adapt this to different situations. For example, making 'small talk' with a stranger at a bus stop about the weather is acceptable. Talking about personal issues would not be.

Sometimes, people with Asperger syndrome learn words and phrases without having the full understanding of what they really mean. This means they may sometimes use them in the wrong context. It can be very frustrating for someone with Asperger syndrome when they find it difficult to express what they are thinking or feeling.

Social situations

Some people with Asperger syndrome may have very little interest in interacting with others and prefer spending time alone. Others may want to socialise and build relationships but they may find the 'unwritten rules' of social interaction confusing and make mistakes. Social rules vary depending on who you are talking to and what the scenario is which can make the experience unpredictable and stressful.

Some people with Asperger syndrome find making eye contact difficult and may find that being in close proximity to others is uncomfortable. They may find it difficult to read and interpret body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and other non-verbal communication.

Joining or starting conversations is often hard for people with Asperger syndrome. For example, they may have difficulty knowing when to allow the other person to contribute or when somebody is not interested and it's time to stop talking.

Many people with Asperger syndrome prefer written communication such as e-mail or text so that they have time to process what has been said and consider what they are going to say before responding. This is increasingly relevant as their stress and anxiety levels rise.

Flexibility of thought

Dealing with the very unpredictable nature of the world can be difficult for someone with Asperger syndrome. Some people like having a routine and dislike spontaneity or surprises, which can make unplanned changes difficult to cope with. Some people with Aspergers syndrome find thinking about things from another person's point of view difficult. They may also find it difficult to predict the consequences of actions and what may happen in different situations.

Some people with Asperger syndrome have special interests, which can be around anything, for example trains, people, computers and fashion. They may enjoy talking about their special interest, but may not be aware of whether the person they are talking to shares their enthusiasm or not, and when to stop talking about their special interest. Some people with Asperger syndrome have turned their special interests into a career (for example photography, or computer programming).

Sensory Challenges

People with Asperger syndrome can be either over- or under-sensitive to any of their senses (sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing, balance and awareness of where you are in space). This means that one person may dislike bright light and loud noise, sometimes to the point where it is physically painful, but another person may enjoy the sensory stimulation.

People with Asperger syndrome may experience the world around them differently to people without Asperger syndrome.

Useful resources

The Complete Guide to Asperger Syndrome by Tony Attwood (2008)

NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently by Steve Silberman (2016)

The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic by Castellon (2020)

Dude, I'm An Aspie!: Thoughts and Illustrations on Living with Asperger's Syndrome by Matt Friedman (2012)