What is Asperger syndrome?

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism, which is a lifelong disability that affects how a person makes sense of the world, processes information and relates to other people. Autism is often described as a ‘spectrum disorder’ because the condition affects people in many different ways and to varying degrees. (For more information about autism, see the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism, please see our leaflet ‘What is autism?’

What are the characteristics of Asperger syndrome?

The characteristics of Asperger syndrome vary from one person to another but are generally divided into three main groups.

Difficulty with social communication

“People with Asperger syndrome sometimes find it difficult to express themselves emotionally and socially. For example, they may:

• have difficulty understanding gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
• have difficulty knowing when to start or end a conversation and choosing topics to talk about
• use complex words and phrases but may not fully understand what they mean
• be very literal in what they say and can have difficulty understanding jokes, metaphor and sarcasm.

For example, a person with Asperger syndrome may be confused by the phrase ‘That’s cool!’ when people use it to say something is good.

In order to help a person with Asperger syndrome understand you, keep your sentences short — be clear and to the point."

Difficulty with social interaction

“Have difficulty picking up social cues, and difficulty in knowing what to do when I get things wrong.”

Many people with Asperger syndrome want to be sociable but have difficulty with initiating and sustaining social relationships, which can make them very anxious. People with the condition may:

• struggle to make and maintain friendships
• not understand the unwritten ‘social rules’ that most of us pick up without thinking. For example, they may not understand social norms, such as how to behave in a group, or what to say in a conversation.

People with Asperger syndrome sometimes find it difficult to play ‘let’s pretend’ games or prefer subjects rooted in logic and systems, such as mathematics.

Other related characteristics

Love of routines

“If I get anxious I get in a tizz. I have a timetable; it helps me to see what I have to do next, otherwise I get confused.”

To try and make the world less confusing, people with Asperger syndrome may be very attached to their routines. For example, a person with Asperger syndrome may have rules and rituals (ways of doing things) which they insist upon. Young children, for example, may insist on always walking the same way to school. In class, they may get upset if there is a sudden change to the timetable. People with Asperger syndrome often prefer to order their day to a set pattern. For example, if their work or school hours, an unexpected delay to their journey to or from work can make them anxious or upset.

Special interests

“Robert only has problems with touch when he doesn’t know what’s coming — like putting on clothes and people accidentally brushing into him. Light touch seems to be worse for him than a firm touch.”

People with Asperger syndrome may develop an intense, sometimes obsessive, interest in a hobby or collecting. Sometimes these interests are lifelong, in other cases, interest is replaced by an unrelated interest. For example, a person with Asperger syndrome may focus on learning all there is to know about trains or computers. Some are exceptionally knowledgeable in their chosen field of interest. Without encouragement, interests may not develop at all. Other related characteristics may be pursued rigidly and repetitively eg mathematical calculations.

Sensory difficulties

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The National Autistic Society is the UK’s leading charity for people affected by autism. Over 500,000 people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over two million people whose lives are touched by autism every single day. Despite this, autism is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. Which means that many of these two million people get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need. Together, we are going to change this.

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