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A guide to Asperger Syndrome

*autism.west midlands is an independent provider of services
for people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders*

What is Asperger Syndrome?

Asperger Syndrome is sometimes referred to as able autism or high functioning autism. It includes people of average to high intelligence and is a part of the 'Triad of Impairments' that typifies autism. The Triad refers to the impairments in communication, social interaction and imagination.

People with Asperger Syndrome may have narrow interests and show inflexibility of thought and behaviour. However, their main problem is often in their apparent independence, which belies their social disability. Some can manage well in certain areas, whilst having unexpected gaps in ability in others, and the mismatch of intelligence and performance can easily lead to a misunderstanding of the person with Asperger Syndrome.

In some cases individuals are not diagnosed until adulthood and often have to cope without support or any understanding of the condition. This can lead to other problems, such as depression and anxiety.

Although individuals with Asperger Syndrome vary enormously in the way their condition affects them and in their ability to hide or overcome their problems, there are some common features.

Common Features

- Stilted speech, with repetitive use of phrases and topics of conversation limited to own interests.
- Inability to pick up on verbal clues and hints and to understand and use facial expression, body language or eye contact appropriately.
- Little insight into the unwritten rules of human relationships. May lack empathy with other people and appear rude, selfish or tactless. Seem to lack understanding of how people affect and influence each other.
- Social situations can cause extreme anxiety, linked to an awareness of being different and not fitting in, fear of failure, being misunderstood or not being able to understand what others expect.
- Change, especially unplanned change, is experienced as very stressful. Predictable, repetitive activities provide reassurance.
- High motivation and knowledge in own field of special interest, sometimes to the point of obsession.
- Good attention to detail but great difficulty in seeing 'the bigger picture' because this requires flexible and abstract thinking, which they find difficult.
- Difficulty in predicting the consequences of their actions and putting things into context.
- Difficulties with planning and time management, due to anxiety when working under pressure and a perfectionist streak.
- Poor spatial awareness, motor skills and co-ordination may also be associated.

What can help?

Lack of understanding causes many of the difficulties associated with Asperger Syndrome. Once the condition and its effects are understood, the individual can concentrate on overcoming the negative aspects and making the most of the positive. Qualities like honesty, reliability, determination and dedication are associated with the condition, and many people show talent in maths, music, computing, science and technology.

Support

Getting the right type and amount of support is vital. Once problems occur, anxiety can overtake, issues are exaggerated and become much harder to deal with. Maximum support at the outset can be reduced as the individual gains confidence and experience.

Structure

Written or other visual information may be helpful for the individual to cope with possible change, and a structured environment may help to make events more understandable and predictable.

Consistency

There needs to be regular monitoring of possible difficulties, to prevent anxiety. With the right support and a tolerant environment, people with Asperger Syndrome can develop their skills and be helped to find their own ways of adapting to society's demands, making the most of their different way of viewing the world.

For further information, see contact address on the back page or contact our website www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk