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What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Dr Hans Asperger, an Austrian paediatrician, originally described Asperger's Syndrome in 1944. The syndrome has more recently been classified as an autistic spectrum disorder. Children and adults with Asperger's Syndrome have an intellectual capacity within the normal range, but have a distinct profile of abilities that has been apparent since early childhood. The profile of abilities includes the following characteristics:

*A qualitative impairment in social interaction,

- Failure to develop friendships that are appropriate to the child's developmental level.
- Impaired use of non-verbal behaviour such as eye gaze, facial expression and body language to regulate a social interaction.
- Lack of social and emotional reciprocity and empathy.
- Impaired ability to identify social cues and conventions.

*A qualitative impairment in subtle communication skills:

- Fluent speech but difficulties with conversation skills and a tendency to be pedantic, have an unusual prosody and to make a literal interpretation.

*Restrictive Interests:

- The development of special interests that is unusual in their intensity and focus.
- Preference for routine and consistency.

The disorder can also include motor clumsiness and problems with handwriting and being hypersensitive to specific auditory and tactile experiences. There can also be problems with organisational and time management skills and explaining thoughts and ideas using speech. The exact prevalence rates have yet to be determined, but research suggests that it may be as common as one in 250. The aetiology is probably due to factors that affect brain development and not due to emotional deprivation or other psychogenic factors.

The characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome described above are based on the diagnostic criteria and current research and have also been modified as a result of my extensive clinical experience. I would like to provide a personalised description of Asperger's Syndrome that also incorporates the person's qualities as well as their difficulties.

From my clinical experience I consider that children and adults with Asperger's Syndrome have a different, not defective, way of thinking. The person usually has a strong desire to seek knowledge, truth and perfection with a different set of priorities than would be expected with other people. There is also a different perception of situations and sensory experiences. The overriding priority may be to solve a problem rather than satisfy the social or emotional needs of others. The person values being creative rather than co-operative. The person with Asperger's syndrome may perceive errors that are not apparent to others, giving considerable attention to detail, rather than noticing the 'big picture'. The person is usually renowned for being direct, speaking their mind and being honest and determined and having a strong sense of social justice. The person may actively seek and enjoy solitude, be a loyal friend and have a distinct sense of humour. However, the person with Asperger's Syndrome can have difficulty with the management and expression of emotions. Children and adults with Asperger's syndrome may have levels of anxiety, sadness or anger that indicate a secondary mood disorder. There may also be problems expressing the degree of love and affection expected by others. Fortunately, we now have successful psychological treatment programs to help manage and express emotions.