



Asperger's Syndrome For Adults

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What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Asperger's Syndrome (also known as Asperger's disorder) is a mental condition that impairs social development. It occurs in about 36 out of every 10 000 people, and there are approximately nine times as many males with Asperger's as females. People with Asperger's Syndrome are often known as Aspies, Aspergians, or Asperger's Autistic.

Asperger's Syndrome includes a number of core symptoms, as well as many additional symptoms that may occur in some cases and. An individual who does not exhibit the core symptoms probably does not have Asperger's Syndrome. The core symptoms are:

Social difficulties, including at least two of the following:

- Problems with non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and other body language. These problems can include both communicating and understanding other people's communications. (For example, recognizing when someone is bored with a conversation.)
- Difficulties making and keeping friends. Many people with Asperger's Syndrome are not anti-social and do want to have friends, but they often find it very difficult.
- A lack of interest in the hobbies, experiences, or interests of other people.
- A limited ability to participate in two-way emotional or social exchanges with other people.

Repetitive and restricted behaviors, including at least one of the following:

- A tendency to follow specific and often impractical routines. When these routines are broken, it can be very traumatic for a person with Asperger's as they often have problems coping with change.
- Repetitive body movements, such as finger tapping, or rocking back and forth while seated.
- A fixation on specific parts of objects, such as doorknobs or car windshield wipers.

Some additional symptoms that are often associated with Asperger's Syndrome include:

- Being extremely organized: people with Asperger's may pay attention to time management, or carefully organize their belongings. Individuals with Asperger's are often also details-oriented.
- Clumsy and uncoordinated body movements, which can cause problems with such activities as writing, walking, or playing sports. People with Asperger's also often exhibit awkward body posture.
- Although many individuals with Asperger's have excellent vocabularies and above-average language skills, they may have difficulties understanding figurative language. For example, someone with Asperger's might have trouble understanding the phrase "in the blink of an eye".
- Speaking in a slow or monotone fashion.
- Difficulty coping with certain types of sensations, such as bright lights, loud noises, or rough-textured clothing.

- Although people with Asperger's may have difficulties empathizing with other people's emotions, their own reactions are often as strong as the emotional reactions of others, or sometimes even stronger. However, they may have difficulty expressing their feelings, and things that produce strong reactions in people with Asperger's may seem unusual to others.
- Learning difficulties, especially involving abstract ideas, for example numbers. In some cases, people with Asperger's also have difficulty making generalizations. They do not understand that a rule that applies in one situation would also apply to similar situations. For example they might not understand that the rule "always chew with you mouth closed" applies to all kinds of food.
- doing well at highly structured and goal-oriented tasks, while finding themselves disoriented by tasks that require creativity or flexible thinking.

People with Asperger's Syndrome are of average or above-average intelligence. In fact it is very likely that an unusual proportion of highly intelligent people have Asperger's Syndrome.

A person exhibits some of the listed symptoms, but they are not significant as symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome, unless they affect that person's ability to function effectively in everyday life.

If a large proportion of the following statements apply to you, there is a chance that you may have Asperger's Syndrome:

- I find social situations confusing.
- I find it hard to make small talk.
- I tend to turn any conversation back onto myself or my own topic of interest.
- I am good at picking up details and facts.
- I find it hard to work out what other people are thinking and feeling.
- I can focus on certain things for very long periods.
- People often say I was rude even when this was unintentional.
- I have unusually strong, narrow interests.
- I do certain things in a very inflexible, repetitive way.
- I have always had difficulty making friends.

Used with permission of the Cambridge Lifespan Asperger Syndrome Service (CLASS), www.autismresearchcentre.com/clinical/class.asp

Dual Diagnosis

Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome are often diagnosed with other conditions as well. Some of the more common Diagnoses include:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)
- Depression (Major Depressive Disorder or Adjustment Disorder with Depressed mood).
However, individuals with Asperger's can also simply be depressed because of the loneliness and frustration that are brought on by their problems with socialization.
- Bipolar Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Each of these other diagnoses can have its own impact on an individual with Asperger's, and may need to be treated as well. For more information about these conditions, check the internet or your local library, or consult a qualified mental health professional.

Responsibility for Yourself

Just as some people have problems learning math or reading, individuals with Asperger's Syndrome have problems with social learning. These problems can make it difficult to become fully self-sufficient. But, because people with Asperger's Syndrome have average or above-average intelligence, and Asperger's Syndrome does not cause serious physical impairment, individuals with Asperger's, in Alberta, are generally required to become independent as adults. While this is a challenge, it is not impossible.

If you have Asperger's Syndrome, you may find that you have already made a great deal of progress in coping with your condition. Think about which behaviors cause problems for you in your day-to-day social interactions and see if you can learn to control or alter them. Carefully study your behavior and the behavior of those around you. A support group may help give you important feedback that can help you in your relationships with others. It may make you uncomfortable, but in the end it should be worth it.

If you are an adult with Asperger's Syndrome, remember that you are still responsible for your actions. Even though it may be easy to blame rudeness or insensitivity toward others on Asperger's Syndrome, individuals with Asperger's still have free will and the power to choose. Just as people with Asperger's need understanding about their condition from family, professionals and the public at large, there is a need for Aspies to learn to be respectful of others and to understand that even though others may not have Asperger's Syndrome, they may have their own unique burdens. Many social relationships can be improved when each party makes an attempt to be as respectful and understanding of differences as possible.

Modifying or Coping With Sensory Situations

It has been estimated that at least 40 percent of people with Asperger's Syndrome are unusually sensitive to certain kinds of sensations. They may have difficulties processing or integrating the information they get through one or all of their senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, balance, and weight. For those with sensory sensitivities, it can present a major obstacle to functioning in everyday life. For some people with Asperger's Syndrome, something as small as the hum of fluorescent light, or the traffic noise blocks away, can be potentially traumatizing.

Many experts believe that sensory difficulties are at the root of many of the symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome, such as repetitive body movements, limited eye contact, or poor physical coordination. Since the world is unfortunately not designed to accommodate the needs of people with Asperger's Syndrome, it is impossible to completely avoid potentially unpleasant sensory situations, but there are still a few things that can be done to reduce contact with them or minimize their impact.

The main treatment for the sensory problems that are associated with Asperger's Syndrome, is known as sensory integration therapy. Usually administered by occupational or physical therapists, it involves challenging the patient with controlled sensory stimulation. Although it is usually used on children, it is also known to be helpful for adults. If you know or suspect you have problems with sensory integration, taking a proactive approach to help yourself cope is important. Learn what situations, environments, or objects help you feel calm and centered. Ensure that you spend time in calming environments on a daily basis, or more frequently if needed.

Carry a “comfort kit” with you whenever you go out, containing objects that can block out unpleasant sensations or reduce sensory-related anxiety, such as earplugs, smelling salts, or stress balls.

One area where you can have considerable control over your sensory experiences is your home life. When choosing a residence, it is important to consider possible sensory problems, such as traffic noises, planes flying overhead, or bright lights coming from nearby buildings at night.

Soundproofing can also be important, and it may be helpful to use lamps and ceiling lights with dimmers or suitably bright light bulbs. Use sounds that are pleasant to you, music, the lull of a fountain, etc. and colors and textures on the furniture and walls to create an atmosphere in your home that calms and pleases you.

Post-secondary Education

If you are interested in post-secondary education, look into a variety of different institutions and consider how well they can meet your needs. Think about your level of comfort with different class sizes, group work, etc., and whether you require a highly structured school environment. You may also want to find out what types of services different institutions provide to students with special needs. Distance learning is also a possibility, but you should consider the social and academic opportunities that are presented by a more traditional post-secondary setting.

Employment

If you are interested in employment, look for work that employs your strengths, interests, and abilities. A structured job with clearly defined objectives may offer a sense of security as well as clear guidelines. Jobs that focus on details may be ideal for you, especially in those areas where social interactions are limited. Likewise, jobs that require a high degree of social awareness may not be for you. Look for an employer who understands that it may be hard for you to read social situations accurately.

You may also want to look for work situations that offer supports such as a job shadow, who will help you gain work skills and learn the behaviors and social skills that will help you succeed on the job. In the Edmonton area, contact the Autism Society of Edmonton Area to find out whether any special projects exist to help adults with Asperger's and employers create viable work experiences.

Help is also available through EmployAbilities, a non-profit organization that help Albertans with disabilities, including psychological disabilities like Asperger's, find employment. EmployAbilities offers a wide variety of services, including numerous training programs, career counseling, job placement assistance, computer training, and personal development workshops. You can learn more about EmployAbilities by calling **(780) 423-4106**, or by visiting their website at www.employabilities.ab.ca.

You can also check out WORKink Alberta (ab.workink.com), a website that provides resources for job-seekers with disabilities. Features include job postings, online counseling, virtual workshops, an agency directory, and informative articles on career topics.

Living Arrangements

Even for people without Asperger's Syndrome, leaving home is a big step; but for people with Asperger's, the transition to independent living raises a number of special issues. The many changes and new responsibilities that are associated with independent living can be a shock for individuals who depend on routines, so it may be important to make the transition to full independence a gradual one. Some options include supervised apartments, where staff members visit several times per week, or supervised group homes. It might also be desirable to start by spending a few days each week living in the new residence, and the rest of the time back home with one's family. If you have roommates, consider that they might not be as understanding about your condition as your family members are, and try to meet them halfway in terms of producing a stable living environment. Although it can help to plan ahead and create routines for cooking, cleaning, and similar domestic tasks, there are many aspects of independent life that cannot easily be planned for. For situation like this, it is important to receive adequate support from friends or family.

For a more comprehensive discussion of independent living for people with Asperger's, go to www.autismandcomputing.org.uk/marc2.en.html

Famous People Who May Have Had Asperger's Syndrome

Some experts believe that a number of famous historical figures may have suffered from Asperger's Syndrome, including:

- German physicist Albert Einstein
- British novelist Jane Austen
- American artist Andy Warhol
- British biologist Charles Darwin
- Polish-French chemist Marie Curie
- Lewis Carroll, author of Alice in Wonderland
- Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates
- British physicist Sir Isaac Newton

Among some contemporary figures, some sources claim that famed American filmmaker Steven Spielberg and Canadian actor Dan Aykroyd have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

The Positive Aspects of Asperger's Syndrome

Although Asperger's syndrome can make life difficult in many ways, it also provides some unique gifts.

- Many people with Asperger's Syndrome have an unusually good memory.
- The focused interests of people with Asperger's can give them a unique knowledge of particular topics. People with Asperger's can become leading authorities in their areas of interest.
- Thinking systematically and being detail-oriented can be very useful traits, especially in certain kinds of work, for example, accounting, computer programming, or engineering.
- Most importantly, Asperger's Syndrome gives a person a unique perspective on the world. People with Asperger's Syndrome may not be as socially aware as others, but they can also appreciate things that most of the world is completely unaware of.

Asperger's Syndrome Resources in the Community

In addition to the resources already mentioned in this booklet, there are several other local resources for adults with Asperger's. If you know of any other resources that you think we should include in this booklet, please contact the autism society.

Autism Society of Edmonton Area

ASEA offers a drama group that is open to adults with Asperger's. For more information, contact ASES at **(780) 453-3971**, or visit our website at www.autismedmonton.org.

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

There are a number of services for adults available through CMHA, including outreach and advocacy services, as well as a day program. None of these services are tailored specifically for people with Asperger's, but individuals with Asperger's are welcome to apply. You can contact CMHA at **(780)414-6300** or via their website www.cmha-edmonton.ab.ca. Vacancies are limited, and a referral from a medical or mental health professional may be necessary.

Asperger's Syndrome Resources on the Internet

Asperger's Disorder Homepage

www.aspergers.com/

G.R.A.S.P. (The Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership)

www.grasp.org/

Aspie-quiz

www.rdos.net/eng/

Medline Plus Asperger's Syndrome Links

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/aspergerssyndrome.html

O.A.S.I.S. (Online Asperger's Syndrome Information and Support)

www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/

A Survival Guide for People with Asperger's Syndrome

www.autismandcomputing.org.uk/marc2.en.html

University of Southern California's Autism and Asperger's Syndrome information page

www.aspergerssyndrome.org

Autism is:

These figures illustrate some of the manifestations of autism. Not all persons with Autism experience each of these symptoms and they vary in severity.



Early diagnosis is essential if people with autism are to achieve their full potential. It is only when their disability is understood that they can be helped to maximize skills and minimize problems.



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