

Web-Based Radio Show

Asperger's Syndrome:


How Asperger's Syndrome is more and more frequently diagnosed and how it is generally being used for a variety of individuals who have difficulties with social relationships or whose thinking tends to be rigid or lacks flexibility, including those who have trouble reading social signals; those who may use language with good memory and good basic vocabulary but lack an understanding of subtlety and nuance; individuals who have trouble making inferences or being creative in their use of ideas; and for individuals who are socially awkward or who get overwhelmed

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Good morning and welcome to our web-based radio show. Thank you for joining us today. Today we're going to make some brief comments on a subject we've talked about before – but usually only in part and not as a cohesive subject – and that is Asperger's Syndrome. Many of the principles that we've talked about, generally promoting development, apply to children and/or adults with Asperger's Syndrome, as well; but I think it's appropriate to direct some comments to this widely used diagnosis of the moment.

Asperger's Syndrome is more and more frequently diagnosed in children, adolescents, and young adults and it's generally being used for a variety of individuals who have difficulties with social relationships or whose thinking tends to be rigid or lacks flexibility, including those who have trouble reading social signals; those who may use language with good memory and good basic vocabulary, but lack an understanding of subtlety and nuance; individuals who have trouble making inferences or being creative in their use of ideas; and for individuals who are socially awkward or who get overwhelmed. From a technical point of view the diagnosis should be used with individuals who meet the criteria for an autistic spectrum disorder but who have more advanced language capacities. Often the criteria for autism, more generally, that should be applied are not applied rigorously and individuals who have great warmth and intimacy with one or two people, who may be very close to a parent, for example, but have more trouble reading social signals with peers or when they get overwhelmed,



they still receive such a diagnosis. Individuals who have lots of anxiety or lots of obsessive patterns may receive such a diagnosis if their anxiety or obsessiveness interferes with their social relationships and social interactions.

The important point to make as a first point is that there may be many pathways and many different patterns to what is labeled today as Asperger's Syndrome. Let's look at the developmental pathways that different individuals have. For example, we've talked before about individuals who are very sensory over reactive and who have problems planning their actions and difficulties with understanding how their bodies operate in space. Such individuals easily get overwhelmed in many situations. During the critical juncture from about seven or eight months of life to about 20 months of life when nonverbal gestures are being learned and a sense of emotional expressions are being mastered through these nonverbal gestures, such as smiles, smirks, head nods, tone of voice – actually, toddlers as we know are learning to decipher all these subtleties – because of the kinds of difficulties we just mentioned, such individuals may miss out on full mastery of this whole nonverbal communication system and therefore will be less able to read complex and subtle social signals, which then throws them off the pathway to more advanced social relationships and peer relationships as they get older. If they have very good memory skills they may master language in the memory sense, but not in a subtle sense of applying it to complex social situations. Since the subtleties of language often have to do with tone of voice, such as irony or innuendo, just the slightest bit of change in tone, for example, is the difference between a joke and making fun of someone. That, combined with a twinkle in the eye or a hostile look, may determine whether the individual is friendly and warm or an enemy.

These kinds of judgments, that really inform language and could be considered the epiphenomena of language or the framework in which language exists, are missed and not mastered. So from a developmental point of view there can be a variety of reasons that this stage of development – when nonverbal signals or (what we call in our framework) levels 3 and 4, leading up to the use of creative ideas – when that's not fully mastered we may have a situation where social signals are difficult.

There are other pathways to what we call Asperger's Syndrome, as well. Some of the children have a mixture of both sensory over reactivity but may also be a little bit sensory craving, as well, and have a mixed pattern. They may also have weaker visual-spatial capacities and visual-spatial problem solving, although they have good visual memory. They remember everything they see, but they don't think in space; they don't





figure out how other people's bodies relate to their bodies in space, or how to throw or catch a ball and track it well. So they may have coordination and motor problems. They may have body awareness difficulties, generally, or they may have difficulties with spatial thinking, like how a block design would look in terms of its mirror image, yet they may have very good memories for where things are and how to get places, just as they have a very good memory for words. So they memorize whole books and whole songs, but then have trouble knowing the subtle ways to use it. In this sense it's a little bit of an error to say they have advanced language development or even fully healthy language development because it's really the memory part of language that's working well for them, not the pragmatic use of language or the more subtle use of language or the abstract use of language or the use of language for abstract problem solving, such as these complex social situations.

In a similar vein, their reading comprehension may look good in the early years when it's just remembering what a passage said and picking out the right facts, but when it comes to interpretation or making inferences from a passage – talking about character development, comparing his background with that of the character's in the novel – that may be far more difficult. The same thing applies to history, so that facts may be easy to memorize. Geography may become a fascination because of the individual's memory capacity, but understanding how people feel in different geographical areas or different cultures – what motivated people in different times of history to do what they did, what really precipitated that wars beyond just a memory, or identifying with the individuals in the North and the South, for example, in the Civil War – that would be much more difficult.


So there can be a number of different pathways, but some common features of a very good verbal memory may characterize Asperger's Syndrome when it's used as a diagnostic label and when it's appropriately used. Some individuals have a very good and subtle reading of social cues, have good abstract reasoning, and are capable of great intimacy, but are just very sensory over reactive and get very anxious and can't use a lot of these abilities in complex social situations. It's a mistake to label such individuals with Asperger's Syndrome because they more likely should be described in terms of their anxiety since they don't have other core features, although their social problems may look similar and they may be socially awkward because they get overwhelmed. Other individuals who are very bright and creative and capable of great intimacy but are very under reactive to sensation and tend to live in fantasy worlds and




are therefore not very socially adept may also be given the label Asperger's Syndrome. Even though they're capable of abstract thinking and making inferences and have a very close relationship with one or two key people, they may tend to get self-absorbed in their own world and really should not receive the label.

Now let's turn to some brief comments about what to do about it and how to be most helpful with individuals with this pattern. These principles will apply to children, adolescents, and adults. The key is to remember that you get what you practice. So before we talk about what to do, let's talk about some of the common errors. Remember, these are individuals who are trying to use their good memories and learn rote rules for complex social situations that require a subtle reading of cues, the ability to make inferences, and the use of more abstract and reflective thinking capacities. So, the individual, naturally, is trying to bypass the developmental pathway that leads to healthy social relationships and healthy thinking patterns and substitute what they already do well with their strength, which is their very good memory. So if they can learn rules and make rules for how you greet people, how you say hello, how you say goodbye and rules for when someone is a friend or a foe, they can feel more comfortable. But such an approach really digs the hole deeper because there are millions, if not billions, of rules that would need to be applied to every conceivable complex social situation where you have to almost be what we consider "intuitive," but what's intuitive is really a very rapid pre-conscious process of reading signals and responding.

So the real approach is to help individuals back on the healthy developmental pathway that they missed out on. To do this they need lots of practice being in social relationships where they'll learn to read the facial expressions and nuances, but they can't do this by memorizing rules or using pictures, learning to label "happy" and "sad" and "mad" and "jealous" from pictures or from looking at pictures of eyes. They really need to be in these situations and get the hang of it and get the feel of it and just be in an interaction socially with someone and with many people for long periods of time – the more hours they log in this, the better they'll master it. It's kind of like learning French or Spanish or Italian in the full immersion program where that's all you do for two or three months and you speak that language or you go to the country and you get the hang of it, versus trying to memorize the grammar and learn from a textbook. One leads to a much more natural way of learning French or Spanish or Italian.




How do you do this without overwhelming the individual? One way, and the most important principle, is to remember our six basic milestones. Always create a situation where the individual is feeling calm, regulated, and secure. You want to increase their security. If they're sensory over reactive you can't do this in a busy, noisy setting where they're going to feel overloaded; it has to be a quiet setting with one person, usually a very empathetic and supportive person. Help them get engaged and feel warm and intimate. The person may not be able to verbalize what warm, intimate feelings feel like, but nonetheless they can experience it and usually have such relationships with a person or two, often, if they've been fortunate to have a parent who's warm and empathetic or a sibling or a good friend to help them experience that. Sometimes it may need to be a therapeutic relationship with a therapist. Sometimes it can be a friend or a parent or a relative, but there has to be someone who is there for them and is always in a comforting mode for them so they can experience that intimacy. Then in that relationship and in other relationships – and the key here is to move very gradually – have the person who's working with the individual or interacting with him be animated, but not overwhelming. Here we need a person who's expressive and emotive so that the nonverbal signals, facial expressions, twinkle in the eye, look of pleasure or look for disdain is fairly clear, along with the word, and that person should engage the individual in creative activities and logical discussions. For an adult the creative activities might be art or sculpting or writing creative stories together. For a teenager it might be engaging in a hobby together, but in a creative way, so if they like memorizing geography and looking at maps and memorizing how many individuals live in different countries, always go to the opinions, "Well, which country would be better and why? Where would you like to live?" So don't stay with the facts; use the facts as a take-off for opinions and thinking and more problem solving. For a child pretend play is the best – become a character in the drama, but gradually expand that drama from cars simply being lined up to, "Well, which cars are better and faster? How do they feel?" Maybe your car is asking the other car or you're having races and you're making it interactive. The first step is simply to get more emotional emotiveness and expressiveness into the interaction without worrying about labeling the words or feelings; let it evolve naturally through the interaction. Just look at the facial expression of the person you're working with and see if their facial expressions are becoming a little more animated, a little more expressive. That's the first step – get a little more expression, a little more warmth, a little more intimacy – and you're enticing that.



Then you're trying to gradually increase the flexibility without worrying about the words by increasing the range of emotion, creating a little bit of competition or a little bit of conflict or a little bit of, "Gee, I don't want to do that today," so the person has to deal with a wider range of feelings. Usually aggression is very difficult and very, very scary. If you can get through the assertiveness and the aggression and handling a little bit of conflict, then you can get to other feelings and then you can start talking about feelings. First you have to get that emotive phase, with the expressiveness getting broader and more flexible and that can take many months and even years, sometimes, depending on the age of the person. Once you have increased flexibility on the nonverbal side you can start talking about feelings and help the individual label his own feelings and those of others and talk about how they feel and how they think other people feel. That's a very gradual process. We do our Thinking about Tomorrow game where we anticipate challenging and also easy situations that will happen the next day and how we're going to feel, how the other person feels, what we routinely do, and alternatives. The key thing is becoming a poet of one's feelings. Then gradually increase the complexity of the social situations from just one person to maybe two and then a small group. Increase the complexity of a sensory environment from quiet and supportive to one that's a tiny bit noisier or one with a tiny bit more activity. Increase the person's tolerance. This is a very, very gradual process; the key thing is to move gradually and always to provide support for the basics: security, regulation, and a lot of warm, intimate engagement and a lot of interaction with a core person who's the trusted, reliable person in the individual's life.

As the individual becomes more verbal and more reflective, then you can get into a process that's more like regular psychotherapy, where the person explores their feelings, explores the feelings of others, and talks about what's easy and what's hard for them. You want to anticipate a long-term relationship if you're a therapist or a parent or a mentor or a teacher or someone in a helping relationship with individuals with this sort of a challenge, because they'll always need that person in their corner who can always be that base of security for them.

In terms of education or employment, it's important to find interests and special interests and hobbies and work situations that lend themselves to a lot of self control, where the person can control their environment, where they're not going to be overloaded or overwhelmed, where they can titrate how much social interaction they have, and yet where there are opportunities for warm, nurturing relationships.



So those are some of the principles. Also we want to have a program where we also strengthen some of the weaker areas. So if an area of weakness is body coordination or body awareness, we want to have a program with motor skills and motor coordination where we do that two or three times a day, but in fun activities. It could be sports, it could be dancing, or it could be yoga. We want to improve visual-spatial thinking – being able to see the world from different angles, like an architect – if that’s a weaker area. We want to strengthen verbal abstract reasoning through the natural interactions, natural conversations through the processes just described. We don’t want a didactic approach to abstract reasoning, but we can discuss books and history and literature and culture, all as part of learning to make inferences and getting better abstract reasoning, always through that personal approach that projects the individual into the situation, asking, “Well, how would you feel in that situation? How would you feel if you lived in that culture, if you lived in historical times?” as the basis for how they feel. So we don’t use memory but we do it through personal identification.

So it’s a very gradual process, but one that basically builds and fills in the developmental steps that have been missing in early development – that’s the key. That’s what we want the environment or the family or the therapy team to provide. Sometimes the question of medication comes up and some of the medications that help with anxiety for certain individuals may be helpful to reduce the anxiety level and reduce their response to the sensory overload so the person isn’t on a fight-flight or panic mode and it allows them to relax a little more and read social signals a little better.

We’ll return to this subject many times in the future, but here are some beginning comments.