

A GP's Guide to Adults with ASPERGER SYNDROME

Are there any patients who do not have serious 'mental health' difficulties, yet find it hard to fit in socially, have an unusual social style, maybe unable to complete a college course, have no friends, experience anxiety and stress, or cannot find stable employment? If so, they may have Asperger Syndrome.

What is Asperger Syndrome?

Asperger Syndrome, is a developmental disorder on the autistic spectrum.

If your patient list is 5,000, expect there to be approximately 4 children and 14 adults with Asperger Syndrome (Ehlers and Gillberg, 1993).

People with Asperger Syndrome have few average to higher *intelligence*, (albeit often with uneven scores) but comparatively low social performance.

People with Asperger Syndrome have difficulties communicating effectively with others, often having problems making appropriate conversation, sometimes being pedantic, with poor understanding of others' non-verbal behaviour, and sometimes having difficulty with intonation of voice, facial expression or eye contact. They have difficulties interacting with others, having problems forming close relationships with peers, difficulties knowing how to 'read' others, act in groups, or understand the humour of others. Many people with Asperger Syndrome desire social contact but are less able to understand the reciprocal nature of normal social interaction. In consequence their attempts at interaction can sometimes seem a bit awkward. It can make the person prone to teasing, or being isolated as an adult. It can also make the person appear socially 'inappropriate'.

People with Asperger Syndrome have a need for routines, and may have restricted interests. This may not be obvious, unless asked about. The person may depend on others for the routines of living, in a way not expected, given their apparent intelligence.

Be aware that adults who have Asperger Syndrome may have learnt to 'cover up' their problems and signs will often be more subtle, which is why they encounter difficulty getting support.

Contact the National Autistic Society information centre 0207 9033 599. for further advice.

Those adults who have Asperger Syndrome and have developed serious mental health difficulties would have been referred on already.

Questions to consider when talking with adult patients who may have Asperger Syndrome. Does he or she:

- Find many social situations, and interaction, especially groups, confusing (even though they may be OK one to one with a Doctor)?
- Often find it hard to guess what other people are thinking and feeling, or why they are laughing at a joke?
- Find it difficult to make, and maintain close friendships?
 - Have a history of problems at school/college, difficulties getting on with tutors, or other pupils. Was he or she teased or bullied?
- Find it difficult to find satisfactory employment, or stay in work?
- Have any hobbies or interests which take up a lot of their time especially when younger?
- Get worried or annoyed about changes, especially unexpected changes?
- Display difficulties with communication, and appear to lack social intuition?

If the answer to most of these questions is "yes", and your patient wishes to be assessed, it may be worthwhile discussing with your local Community Mental Health Team.

5 REASONS WHY OPPORTUNITY FOR DIAGNOSIS IS IMPORTANT

- Asperger Syndrome is a recognised condition, and is described in both ICD-10 and DSM-IV international classification systems. If someone meets the criteria they should have the opportunity to be diagnosed.
- Diagnosis enables the individual to make sense of their history, often marked by many experiences of disadvantage and other's misunderstanding.
- Diagnosis can help others - families, friends, partners and carers to better understand and cope with the individual's needs, and behaviour.
- Diagnosis can help the individual locate local support and social skills groups, and get more appropriate support from employers, social and housing services, benefit agencies, colleges and other organisations.