

What to do if . . .

. . . you suspect your partner has the characteristics of Asperger Syndrome?

First, Press the “Pause” button!

Chances are you are daring to suspect you may have just found the answer to what's been affecting your relationship since its early days, and ...

More than likely you will be feeling so relieved and exuberant that you may be tempted to want to shout it from the rooftops, telling your partner, your family, your friends and the professionals you've been trying to get help from for years.

But wait ...

Very few of these people will be ready to hear your news, particularly your partner.

Why?

At this point we have to stop and imagine what it might feel like for ourselves if our partner shared this kind of news with us. Ok, many of us have been working hard on our own issues and believe we may welcome a light bulb moment such as this, but chances are we wouldn't, particularly if we don't know what it means.

It is difficult for anyone to be told that they may think differently to others or be perceiving situations and relationships differently to the way others do. Terrifying in fact. This is news that has the potential to put an individual into a personal crisis, so it is important that you hold your tongue at this time and take responsibility to make sure you have the right information and that you understand it adequately. Then you can follow the steps set out later in this article.

So far as telling family, friends and others, they just simply won't have any frame of reference to be able to give meaning to what you are saying because they have no idea what Asperger's Syndrome really is or how it affects individuals or personal relationships. You are at risk of being doubted, rejected and maybe losing the credibility you've been striving so hard to secure already. You may be perceived as trying to discredit or undermine your partner, trying to secure personal support against your partner or even as being malicious, even though you will absolutely know in your heart that this is not your motivation. All you will want is validation and some understanding, but more than likely you will feel disbelieved and disappointed by people's responses to your new and life-changing information. This is a painful but inadvertent injustice.

Our experience in the partner support group proves over and over again that the only people who have the capacity to validate and understand your experience are those who have a personal experience of an adult with Asperger's Syndrome, preferably in their own family or very close circle of friends. Some people will also understand if they have had workplace or professional experience.

Sadly, very few psychologists or other health care professionals will “get it” either, unless they have chosen, with an open mind, to seek information and guidance from

reliable sources, such as Tony Attwood (www.tonyattwood.com.au), etc (you will find many recommendations on the ASPIA website www.aspia.org.au.)

What should you do then?

a) Start by reading about Asperger's Syndrome in adults and how Asperger's Syndrome can affect a relationship.

Begin with the information provided on ASPIA's website. Additional to some useful information sheets, there are pages that list other useful links, contacts and books. www.aspia.org.au/information.html

Consider purchasing a copy of ASPIA's Handbook for Partner Support which can be downloaded as a paperback, or eBook using Adobe Digital Editions <http://www.lulu.com/shop/carol-grigg/aspias-handbook-for-partner-support/paperback/product-20234619.html;jsessionid=649B6DDEF0551FC5BD8A7D2A78988124>

As you read, take time to think and process what you learn so that you can begin to develop an understanding of the differences that Asperger's Syndrome has created in your relationship, including the reasons why you feel so confused and powerless. Gaining a good understanding can take a while, but is an important part of the journey. You have been travelling this journey for a long time already, and even though you may have now found those answers you've been searching for, there is no "quick fix" or "magic wand". You will more than likely encounter many strong emotions, particularly around loss and grief, as you ponder what you read.

b) Please speak to a Counsellor or Psychologist who is experienced with adults and relationships affected by Asperger's Syndrome. The ASPIA website has a list www.aspia.org.au/professionals.html, many of whom are well known to our group and who contribute to the solid educational base of our support group meetings.

Our support group does strongly advise that you do not seek help from a particular professional unless they have been recommended. Seeking help from a psychologist or health care professional who lacks experience with Asperger's Syndrome may just ensure additional emotional harm for yourself at your most vulnerable time as you feel compelled to justify and defend your personal truth all over again. It is similar to the feeling that an abuse victim experiences when they are disbelieved, compounding and repeating the experience of abuse all over again. It increases our sense of isolation too.

c) Find a way to talk to others whose relationships are affected by Asperger's Syndrome.

See if there is a partner support group near where you live. So far there are only a handful of partner support groups, and most of them are in capital cities (Australia). Once again, check the ASPIA website and newsletters.

If there is no support group near you, see if you can find a discussion forum or chat room for partners. A word of caution about chat forums though - this can be the first place where partners have an opportunity to tell their own story and often this is accompanied by much grief and anger. Many partners also go on then to use

forums as a place to vent regularly rather than seeking education and professional help. It is wonderful to have a place like that to share, but dangerous to you emotionally unless you are strong enough to hear and support other people as well.

ASPIA does offer a private forum for those who are prepared to make a financial commitment to ASPIA and engage in introductory discussions with ASPIA's Co-Ordinator first. Email info@aspia.org.au. Enquiries are welcomed.

Once you are confident in your understanding of Asperger's Syndrome and have adequate personal support, you can then begin to consider how to talk to your partner and others who may need to know. Professional guidance is strongly recommended.

Some basic ideas about how to talk to your partner

Once again, I must stress how important it is to seek and follow professional guidance.

Approaching your partner about the possibility of Asperger's Syndrome may be a once-only opportunity. If not approached carefully and with guidance, the opportunity may pass and be lost for ever.

It is generally not recommended to approach them directly with the claim that they may have Asperger's Syndrome, or to deliberately hand them information about AS. As stated earlier in this document, this could push your partner into a state of personal crisis which neither they nor you will have the experience to deal with safely and effectively. It is best to introduce information to your partner within the context of ongoing professional support and guidance.

There are a few situations that you may be able to take advantage of however:

- i) If your partner is asking for information about how to improve the relationship, or suggesting couple counselling.
- ii) If your partner has discovered information about Asperger's Syndrome for him/herself and wants to talk about it.
- iii) If, in discussions, your partner makes some kind of comment that invites your ideas or suggestions.
- iv) If Asperger's Syndrome is suggested by someone else and your partner seems open to feedback or input from you.
- v) You could leave a well-written article or book discreetly placed somewhere in the home. Important - do not draw attention to it or ask if he/she has read it. Allow your partner time to notice it and process the information. Wait and see. Sometimes they surprise us, and have taken in more than they let on. Remember, they need time to process and don't respond well when we confront them. Often it will take months.
- vi) If you are in crisis, or considering the need to leave the relationship due to safety risks (emotional or physical) then you may have to disclose your observations and concerns, but do so carefully and preferably with professional help.

Talking to others

As mentioned earlier in this document, it is not necessarily wise to expect your family, friends or others to be ready to accept or acknowledge your claims about Asperger's Syndrome. Family members may feel that family dignity is under threat, and may do all they can to save face, as a diagnosis or suggestion of Asperger's Syndrome may create stigma and affect perception of family "honour". Unless families are already comfortable talking about family issues, and are relatively open to the concept of "difference", the suggestion of Asperger's Syndrome will not go down well.

Friends and others will often just play down your claims or suggest that "all men/women are like that". This is because they do not have the capacity to imagine that there are realms outside of their own knowledge or experience and they do not know what to do to help you. They do not see what we witness behind closed doors, and therefore cannot relate to it. Those who've had to confront the presence of a mental illness within their own family context may be far more open to your claims, and far more supportive.

As also mentioned earlier, the experience of our group suggests that you seek out professionals and a support network among those who do have personal and/or clinical experience of Asperger's Syndrome, and derive your personal validation and emotional nourishment from these sources.

In the event of a Family Court matter

Our Family Court system still appears to be relatively ignorant of the impact that Asperger characteristics can have on relationships, family life and parenting.

Some situations to date have been adversely affected when a partner has attempted to suggest that the other partner or parent has Asperger's Syndrome. This can be seen as an attempt to maliciously discredit the other partner/parent in order to gain advantage.

We have been advised by representatives within Children's Services to just stick to the facts of what is taking place, and not attempt to label behaviours as "Asperger" or anything else. If there is physical abuse, state this. If there is verbal or emotional violence, state this. If there is risk of harm or neglect, state this and give examples. Describe behaviours and incidents, don't assume that claiming it is Asperger's Syndrome will turn the light on for anyone. Unfortunately, very few professionals and legal representatives to date have an effective working knowledge of how Asperger's Syndrome can manifest or behave in a relationship or family situation.

In conclusion, our partner community is eagerly awaiting the imminent publishing of results of a number of university based professional research projects that prove the legitimacy of our cries for acknowledgement and support. Updates and announcements will be included in ASPIA's monthly newsletters as available.

Written by Carol Grigg, Dip Counselling.
18 November 2012