



ASPERGER
CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Couplehood and Asperger Syndrome Improving Important Relationships

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As the concept of Asperger Syndrome becomes more visible in our society, more and more undiagnosed adults and their loved ones are seeing popularized views of the condition reflected in television and movie characters and in writings about adulthood proliferating on the internet. What is the relevancy of thinking about such a diagnosis as an adult? An issue that is just beginning to gain attention is that of couplehood and marriage.

As the concept of Asperger Syndrome was developing, many thought that most of those affected lived lives of friendlessness and certainly never married. That may have been because of “clinical bias”, that is clinicians seeing a concept through the eyes of their own experience of who seeks help. Research studies also tend to study populations of individuals who make themselves available either through volunteering or being part of evaluation or treatment somewhere. From these perspectives, we miss considering those doing well enough that they do not seek help and those who have never thought of themselves as having a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome.

Thus, the popularization of Asperger Syndrome has had the effects of making more people aware that the problems they have been experiencing may actually be part of something specific. In addition, the gradual understanding of the concept has impelled schools to give greater consideration to the development of social skills for their students identified with spectrum conditions and to extend that thinking to the general classroom as well. As children mature and their outcome is, in fact, better from a social perspective than it might have been in past times, more individuals and families expect a normalized future with full membership in all that society has to offer.

So, if we think about adults, some of who grew up in times when social skills were better addressed and others who discovered for themselves how to develop meaningful relationship and jobs, we find a population of individuals who have achieved much success, but may

continue to struggle significantly with the social-emotional aspects of life. The development and sustenance of important relationships is an element of life we all aspire to enjoy. After all, humans are social creatures. How to improve that special relationship of couplehood for partners where one or both members have Asperger Syndrome is the focus of this article.

How Asperger Syndrome May Affect Relationships

For many couples, what was initially an interesting difference in the flush of love becomes more challenging as time goes by. The helpful, organizing attitude of one member, or the loyal and intelligent manner of the other, may have drawn them together, but what brings them to conflict or unhappiness is an inherent difference in communication skills and style that many couples find confusing and hurtful. Neither is aware of what is causing their problems, and without that understanding change and adjustment are almost impossible. Let's consider some of the important aspects of a relationship where one of the members has diagnosed or undiagnosed Asperger Syndrome.

For those with Asperger Syndrome, there are real differences in various aspects of function depending on the individual. Some have extreme sensory sensitivities; others do not. Some have extreme rigidity that drives the household; others just a little difficulty with changes. Some have interesting special interests that have led to a successful career; others have more eccentric interests that disrupt family life. Some have slow language processing; others are quite facile. Some have anger management issues or trauma histories or coexisting anxiety or depression. Clearly understanding what differences there may be and how they impact the individual and the relationship should be a first step.

Empathy, or the ability to understand and experience the thoughts and feelings of others, is thought to be a significant problem for individuals with Asperger Syndrome. The literature on marriage and relationships is replete with articles about empathy and its importance in relationships. When one or both partners lack skill in detecting the subtle messages in communication, misunderstanding can result. However, there are evidence-based methods to improve empathic accuracy in which individuals can learn how to attend to and interpret the more subtle aspects of communication (Ickes, W., "Empathic Accuracy," 1997.) Poor communication can be an impediment to understanding and intimacy in any relationship. However, when one member of a couple has Asperger Syndrome, significant differences in communication style and skill can particularly strain a relationship. The partners may feel misunderstood, ignored, criticized, or insulted when that was never the intent of the other. So much can be in play contributing to communication issues that it is important to fully understand the styles and approaches of each partner, as well as the particular skill strengths and challenges each brings to the relationship.

Communication is really the glue that binds people together. Many enter relationships expecting to find perfect communication in a partner. We expect misunderstanding and finding our way with each other early on, but when understanding does not progress, the partners may become concerned that they have serious "relationship" issues. The stronger the love, the more upset partners may become when mutual understanding does not develop well. Particular problems that may arise in a couple where one member has Asperger Syndrome include differences in understanding indirectness, irony, sarcasm, and figures of speech; poor use of intonation, loudness, conversational pace, and facial expression to frame the true meaning of an utterance; wide differences in what each member finds interesting; great differences in speaking

directly versus indirectly; lack of understanding of the social use of small talk; and communicating everything informationally, without awareness of metamessage (the how and why we are saying something the way we are.) Assessing communication skills and styles can be very helpful in resolving misunderstandings if a concerted effort to improve communicative interactions can be made within the couple or through a counseling and skill development intervention.

Partners can sometimes have very different expectations of social behaviors. Some may want frequent engagement with friends and relatives and others may prefer a more private existence with occasional contact with others. What is considered proper social behavior can also be very different between parties. When one member of a couple has Asperger Syndrome, these differences can be magnified by the need to have recovery time from the world of work or the desire to minimize interactions with groups of people.

Many couples have difficulty discussing sensuality and sexuality openly. A partner with Asperger Syndrome may have sensory differences that have an affect or may have poor appreciation for the more subtle aspects of verbal and nonverbal foreplay.

Parenting brings challenges for every couple. If one member has Asperger Syndrome, the characteristics can create additional difficulties. Children present constant needs for parents. It is important that there is flexibility within a family to adjust schedules, priorities, and roles. This kind of flexibility can be hard to achieve for those with rigid expectancies of how a day will go. Other issues can sometimes result from theory of mind deficits. A parent who has poor ability to understand other adults' perspectives may have double difficulty deciphering the thoughts, feelings, and abilities of children. Telling way too much about a subject when a simple homework question was asked or expecting more maturity in behavior than has yet developed are examples of how theory of mind can influence child management. Being rule-bound can sometimes be an asset and sometimes a liability. Children need structure to thrive and well-established family rules can be helpful in creating organization. Alternately, rigid adherence to rules in the face of a need for flexibility can be counterproductive. A parent with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty differentiating circumstances when rules should be kept or bent.

Executive functioning deficits are extremely common for individuals with Asperger Syndrome. Areas considered under this umbrella are thought to be organizational abilities, emotional regulation, shifting mind set, getting started, inhibiting impulses when something needs to be accomplished, and keeping more than one thing in mind at a time or multi-tasking. Executive functioning problems affect many people, not just those on the spectrum. However, it is important to remember that these deficits are not character flaws or purposeful behaviors. They represent real differences in brain function that need to be specifically addressed and supported. Being the partner of someone with executive function difficulties can make one feel alone in assuming family responsibilities. Understanding the specific areas of weakness and strength in this domain can be very helpful in resolving conflicts based on perceived inequality of effort or commitment.

It is always important to remember the many positive things that drew a couple together. Asperger Syndrome is not a collection of negative traits, but a different way of seeing the world based on brain differences. Just as couples where one is right handed and one is left handed sort out how to sit, lie together, or arrange things, couples with communication and/or information processing differences can also learn how to accommodate and support each other.

In 1990, Deborah Tannen published “You Just Don’t Understand,” a popular bestseller that addressed the differences between male and female communication and how these differences develop. Some of the differences couples experience when one has Asperger Syndrome are similar issues as those many other couples face. But Asperger Syndrome, in all its variations, can add an additional element of complexity to a relationship that needs to be addressed if a couple is struggling to relate.

What Can Help?

If you recognize yourself, your partner, or your relationship in the descriptions above you may be thinking that nothing can change. It is true that communication style is difficult to modify, but sometimes developing an understanding of what underlies differences in this area can make a significant impact on both parties. In general, understanding one’s partner’s neurobiological make-up is also helpful in exploring how differences can derail a relationship and figuring out together how to realign the relationship and develop new resources to facilitate interaction. How should one go about making needed changes in such a relationship?

If an individual or partner suspects that Asperger Syndrome is an important contributing factor to relationship difficulties, a diagnosis and evaluation can be helpful. While having a professional give a name to a group of characteristics can be valuable, what is equally important is to assess the components contributing to the diagnosis. There is wide variety in how Asperger Syndrome manifests and examining these components should drive treatment recommendations. For example, some individuals have sensitivities, rigidities, processing difficulties, facial recognition issues, high anxiety, co-occurring depression, or are very easily upset or hurt. Obviously, these individual traits should be taken into account when planning an intervention.

Sometimes one member of a couple may view their relationship as having significant trouble and the other may not. One partner may suspect Asperger Syndrome and the other may be in total disagreement. In these cases, it can be comforting to meet with an expert on Asperger Syndrome to understand if that is or is not a direction worth exploring. How to think about finding someone who can be helpful in the world of Asperger Syndrome was addressed in “Making the Right Decision When Choosing a Psychologist” “Autism Spectrum News,” Volume 2, No. 4, Spring 2010. Getting and understanding the diagnosis or discussing the issue of Asperger Syndrome with an expert can be a good first step in the process of relationship improvement.

When there is an understanding of just what may be happening because of Asperger Syndrome, the next stage one may wish to think about is becoming more informed about what can be helpful. Books about personal experiences such as “Alone Together, Making an Asperger Marriage Work” by Katrin Bentley, about the process of working on marital issues such as “The Asperger Couple’s Workbook,” by Maxine Aston, or about how communication works in couplehood in general such as “That’s Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships,” by Deborah Tannen can jumpstart an understanding of what may be happening.

Finally, the importance of finding a therapist who has an understanding of both couplehood and Asperger Syndrome can be invaluable. An intervention plan that incorporates communication changes for each member, specific skill development in areas causing misunderstanding, and concrete suggestions for family or couple functioning in the areas delineated earlier is critical.

Sometimes working with marital therapists who lack understanding of the unique contributions Asperger Syndrome makes to relationships cannot help couples develop useful plans for change. Of course, finding all that a couple needs in one professional may not be possible, in which case a cooperative effort between someone who can truly understand the aspects of Asperger Syndrome that are salient to the particular couple and someone who can address relationship and communication issues and make concrete recommendations may be the best available alternative. Encouraging a therapist to learn about Asperger Syndrome and couplehood may not only help the couple in question, but bring about an understanding that will allow that person to have a keener ability to assist other such couples.