

*Say what
you*

mean

*what
you say.*



It is not the academic challenges that cause students with Asperger syndrome to drop out of education, it is the social and organisational ones. **Maxine Aston** outlines how to best help these unique individuals reach their full potential

David is a 22-year-old university student. He is retaking the second year of his degree in aerospace engineering due to failing two modules. David had always shown a strong interest in flying machines and space and knew everything there was to know on the topic. But he had been failing to turn up for lectures and it had been recommended that he might benefit from the university's counselling service. David arrived early for his first session with the therapist.

It quickly became apparent to the therapist that his intelligence was not matched by his confidence and self-esteem. He showed high anxiety in his capacity to achieve academically despite attaining four A grades in his A Levels. David rarely made eye contact unless talking

about his interests and constantly wrung his hands together as he spoke.

When asked about his social life he replied that he did not have one and that he was finding it hard to fit in and be accepted. He said that he would like a girlfriend but had no idea how to go about finding one.

During the session David kept looking at his watch and when asked if he had somewhere he needed to be, he replied, 'No'. He just wanted to see how much time he had left as he had brought a list of topics he wished to discuss. David said this in a way that gave the therapist the impression he thought she should already have known about the list. The communication shared felt disjointed and did not flow naturally, as if something was missing; however, the therapist found it difficult to work out just what this was.

The impact of Asperger syndrome

Asperger syndrome (AS) has been referred to as an invisible disorder, because in the majority of cases the signs are subtle and not immediately apparent. Intelligence can be above average and many are capable of achieving well academically. The impact of AS is on social intelligence, yet this is not always obvious, as it is highly likely that much effort will be made to fit in with others. The AS individual may be well practised at disguising the fact they are struggling both socially and with the environment they are in. Trying so hard will take its toll and could quickly result in a total meltdown if support is not offered.

Many universities are now beginning to recognise that they are in danger of losing some of the top grade students who are on the autistic spectrum. This loss is not due to academic challenges, as the majority of the students will be more than capable of studying and can quickly become experts in their chosen field of study. It will be the lack of structure and the social challenges of university life that will cause the AS student to fall behind in their studies and possibly drop out altogether.

In order to understand why this is happening, it is essential for both lecturers and therapists to have a good awareness of what Asperger syndrome actually is and more importantly, how it will affect and manifest itself in an individual. Unfortunately, many still have a picture of 'Raymond' played by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*¹ in their heads when they think of Asperger syndrome. More recently this has been replaced by 'Christopher', the young man described in the bestselling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*². It would be highly unlikely that either of these characters would find themselves attending college or university, as both could be better described as having a more severe form of autism than Asperger syndrome.



The AS individual may be well practised at disguising the fact they are struggling



Individuals with AS can often appear to be coping very well and are more than capable of attaining high grades. Their strength in many, but not all instances, will reside within the fields of science, mathematics, engineering or IT. Their academic strengths may mask their difficulty fitting in and also their profound struggle with the chaotic social side of university life. This could, if unaided, result in the student becoming socially isolated and feeling alienated by their peer group.

How counsellors can help

What can therapists do to make a difference and offer AS students the support they need? As more students with Asperger syndrome are being recognised, the likelihood that they will find their way into the counselling room has increased.

The most important aspect to understand about each student is that Asperger syndrome does not change personality. Each person is unique and each will come with their individual history and upbringing. However, as much as personalities will differ, the struggles they are facing will not. Issues in social interaction, mind-reading, communication, reading body language, empathetic thought, organisation, and sensory sensitivity will all be affected. How much each area is affected will vary in degrees between individuals on the spectrum. It is important for a therapist to check out all these areas to determine their impact. For example, if reading body language is a particular problem then it is likely that the AS student will be misreading those around them. When I test this ability with clients I often find that they are inclined to interpret facial expressions as negative rather than positive. If this is the case the AS student is likely to react accordingly and may look away and avoid eye contact. In a peer group this may give fellow students the message to keep away and validate to the AS student that they are being rejected or avoided. This could, if unchecked, also result in the AS student becoming socially isolated.

I worked once with a young man who never smiled and would scowl when he was anxious or deep in thought. He had been at university for three months and had not made any friends. I asked him if he ever smiled when he was out. He replied, 'Of course not!' as he only smiled when he was happy. When he was in social situations, he felt too anxious to be happy. He was not aware of the importance of smiling in social situations, and although he found it hard to understand the relevance of smiling, he was able to accept its usefulness. We worked together to develop a smile and he would practise it in front of the mirror. He was pleased by the difference it appeared to make to how others reacted to him.

Mind-reading and working out nonverbal social cues can be extremely difficult for the AS individual and this can have a negative impact on the ability to initiate and maintain friendships. Being in social situations can cause much stress for AS students and at times they will feel totally outside their comfort zone. Events such as freshers' week, parties, social activities, group work and giving presentations can all be very taxing and sometimes impossible to maintain. One of the reasons for this is that stress will enhance the individual's Asperger traits and make any form of communication increasingly difficult.

When I test an AS individual's ability to mind-read I find that completing the task will take longer than for a non-AS individual. This is because the information is being processed by the logical route in the brain, rather than intuition³. The consequence of this will be a

struggle to keep up to speed with others in social communication. For instance, if an AS student is in a social situation, their logical brain will have to work very hard to keep up with their peers. As well as having to work out the social rules and cues and interpret non-verbal communication, they will be trying to figure out what is expected of them and how to respond. The student may quickly become overwhelmed and the result could be a meltdown.

If meltdown (also called overload) occurs, it will portray itself in one of two behaviours: a fight or flight response. Fight is like a temper tantrum: the person may become very loud, very rude and verbally abusive, they could appear physically threatening and may break objects or hurt themselves, they may appear out of control. Fortunately the flight response is more common than the fight response in the clients I have worked with. Flight is like turning off a computer: lights out, complete shutdown. In both cases the individual will feel as though they have lost control. They will find it difficult to communicate and process information and will just want to escape to somewhere safe where they can cut out all sensory information. This may be somewhere quiet or dark; alternatively they may just want to get absorbed in their special interest. Doing this will give their brain time to process the backlog of information and allow them to regain control of their emotions⁴.

Once overload has been reached there is little that can be done to halt the reaction, hence it is important for the AS student to be aware of what it is that triggers overload. This is where a therapist can help and support the student they are working with. By becoming aware of the triggers, coping strategies can be developed and put into place to avoid them.

Creating coping strategies

The therapist can help a student to identify when they are struggling and to put strategies into place. For example, being able to make the excuse to get some air or use the bathroom will allow a short respite. For a complete exit, having an excuse of a deadline to meet or needing to call home will all help towards a socially acceptable exit. AS students want to be accepted by their peers and do not want to appear awkward or different.

Two triggers for overload can be change and a lack of structure. Students who are moving away from home for the first time will be leaving behind their routines, order and familiar surroundings. I suggest to parents of prospective students that they arrange as many visits to the university and the surrounding area as possible. The more familiar the surroundings are to the student, the less stressful the move will be.

Having a routine and a daily plan can help avoid the unpredictable, and structure can play an important role in reducing stress for AS students. Unfortunately,

university life is not based on structure and it is for the student to organise themselves and to develop a timetable of learning and study.

Coping with unexpected change can throw an AS student into utter chaos and can feel very threatening to them. Going to university is a time of major transition, and individuals with AS will struggle with adapting to change both in their environment and their daily life. The AS student may need support with this and having a mentor can be very useful to help them settle in and plan coping strategies. Helping them put the control back into their lives will reduce the risk of anxiety and overload.

However, it is not just the social side of university life and the lack of structure that can be stressful; so can the environment the AS student finds him/herself in.

Resolving environmental issues

Sensory sensitivity does not affect all individuals with AS, but it does affect many. It is important for a therapist to discover what these areas might be and to what extent they may be causing difficulties. An oversensitive reaction to noise, lights and smell can all make university life a nightmare. Fluorescent lighting, chatter, and open working areas can all have a detrimental effect. Noise in particular can make concentration very difficult for the student and result in their not being able to focus on what is being said in lectures or seminars. Being allowed to sit near the front of the lecture hall, having hand-outs, or recording lectures can help. In exam situations, being able to sit with their back against a wall rather than having someone sitting behind them may also help some students. It is about understanding what causes a concern for the student and finding practical ways to make the learning environment more comfortable. The library can be a great place of retreat for many AS students and ideal to escape the interruption of conversation.

Working with AS students requires a therapist to use a language which is very logical and clear. They would be advised to ask simple questions because if ambiguous language is used then important information might not be proffered. Once there is clarity on what the concerning issues are, coping strategies that are realistic and logical can be explored and put in place. For instance, for some students I recommend they wear an iPod or MP3 player when possible and have a selection of happy or calming music to play. This can help concentration and cut out other distracting noises. Music can be very therapeutic for AS individuals and can be a useful tool for describing emotions in the counselling room. Using another means, such as music, colours or numbers⁴ to communicate emotions can be very successful for both therapist and student.

Remember that the AS student will be using their logical brain to work out what is being said³; they will not always be able to read the body language and the non-verbal communication that goes with it. In order to communicate with the client, a therapist will need to be using their logical brain too! Communication needs to be very clear, and a therapist will have to be aware of the words they use and how they use them. If not, misunderstanding will result. Remember that the AS student is likely to be quite pedantic in their communication and could take language very literally.



In order to communicate... a therapist will need to use their logical brain too



Mean what you say and say what you mean is all most individuals with AS want, so do not be afraid to state the obvious as it is often the obvious that AS students will be missing. For example, the role that facial expressions, asking questions and even how one sits, can play in forming friendships is often missed by AS students. Some of my clients feel very alienated and cannot understand why no one talks to them and they end up alone. They might be surprised when I ask them what they do to let others know they want to make friends – often it is something they had not thought about.

Working with AS individuals requires a very different approach to how the majority of therapists are trained. If a therapist wishes to be of benefit to the AS client they will need to understand the autistic spectrum and communicate in a way that their client can understand. Therapy that is emotionally demanding could be damaging to AS clients as it will overload their brains and add to the stress they are already experiencing.

The therapy should not make emotional demands or rely on the client finding insight into the difficulties they are dealing with. Therapy should aim to stay in the present tense and deal with problems in a clear, logical way. To work with AS students a therapist will need to go into their world and communicate in a language they can understand, just as a therapist would if working with a person from a different race or culture.

People with Asperger syndrome have much to offer. My learning from my clients is never ending, as I discover more and more about the unique and special world of Asperger syndrome.

Please note. The latest DSM 5 (2013) has recently changed the terminology for Asperger syndrome to an Autistic Spectrum Disorder Level 1. Due to familiarity and ease, I have continued to use the term Asperger syndrome.

Maxine Aston is a BACP accredited counsellor and has an MSc in Health Psychology. She is qualified as a supervisor and trainer and teacher in adult education. Maxine runs her own counselling centre where she has specialised in working with individuals, couples and families affected by Asperger syndrome since 1998. She also offers assessments for adults wishing to discover whether they are affected by Asperger syndrome.

Maxine is the author of four books and runs workshops for professionals working with couples and individuals affected by Asperger syndrome. She also runs a two-day workshop for the partners in a relationship with a male or female affected by Asperger syndrome. For more information, visit www.maxineaston.co.uk

Key pointers for counsellors working with students who have Asperger syndrome

- Read about and understand AS and its effect on an individual
- Understand what is meant by mind-reading and the difficulties this can cause when socialising
- Be clear what is due to AS and what is down to personality. Then help your client to understand this too
- Communicate in a way that is clear, direct and logical; avoid language that is ambiguous, has double meanings or relies on the student's insight
- Adapt to whatever medium of communication works best for the student
- Teach and help the student develop social skills and understand why these are relevant
- Understand the effect of sensory sensitivity on the student and the importance of the environment
- Help your client to develop or maintain a special interest
- Use and teach organisational and relaxation skills and have knowledge of aids that may help your client (ie using an iPod).

Above all, 'mean what you say and say what you mean'.

References:

- 1 Haden M. The Curious incident of the dog in the night-time: London: Jonathan Cape. 2004.
- 2 Levinson B (director). Rain man. USA: United Artists; 1989.
- 3 Carter R. Mapping the mind. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 1998.
- 4 Aston M. The Asperger couple's workbook. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2009.