

Relinquishing our preferences

Often in the wake of conflict many thoughts pass through my mind as I try to work out what just happened. Conflict seems to happen so easily, even when the situation being negotiated seems like it should be quite routine and non-threatening in the scheme of things.

Now, I believe I am a fairly fair and reasonable person. I like everyone to feel like their preferences have been taken into account in any decisions that affect them, and that the outcome achieved is fairly evenly distributed, or that common ground has been found, more or less.

Naturally, when everyone is fair and reasonable it is expected and accepted that sometimes we won't get exactly what we want, but that another time we will. It's part of the flow of family life and groups.

One thing that seems to surface in our discussions about Asperger's Syndrome is the essential need the ASD individual typically has to have a situation work out the way they want it to or need it to. It is common for the ASD adult to have one specific pathway, prescribed or determined by them, that has to be followed by the partner, family members or a group.

NTs will typically defer to the most strongly expressed need or preference in a relationship, group or family. We don't like anyone to be upset, feel disadvantaged or unfairly treated. And this is how an ASD individual begins to take over control and dominate the choices of the relationship, family or the group.

It is apparent that they are unable to tolerate any pathway or choice other than their own, and when faced with this possibility may react with demonstrations of distress or rage which are traditionally experienced by others as forceful and intimidating. It is typical for those around to then back down and relinquish their own preferences in favour of the preferences of the ASD individual in order to avoid disadvantage or distress to the ASD individual. Once this happens regularly it becomes the "norm" for the ASD individual to dominate a relationship, family or group situation.

It struck me as being another "all or nothing" kind of situation. When they get their way they go on happily (or not), not recognizing that everyone else has now been overlooked and disadvantaged but has to "suck it up".

When they don't get their way, they perceive themselves as overlooked and disadvantaged and cannot tolerate this outcome. We don't like to be accused of being unjust or selfish, so we relinquish our preference and defer to them, again.

One can see how important early intervention and training in social skills are to assist an ASD child to understand and tolerate the need for turn taking and ultimately the concepts of consideration of others and co-operation and collaboration with others as they mature into teens and adults.

We can be proud of our beautiful strengths in flexibility and adaptability, but it is essential that we become aware of the ways this can make us vulnerable to dominant personalities. Just another opportunity to lose our sense of who we are. It is helpful to learn the principles of boundaries.

Carol Grigg, July 2014