

ASPIA – Asperger Syndrome Partner Information Australia

Historical Information

Introduction

Founded as GRASP Partner Support Group in Sydney in 2003 by Carol and Lyn, ASPIA became an incorporated association on 29 July 2005 and operated as a self-funded association run by volunteers, holding monthly support group meetings until August 2023. Our 20th Anniversary celebration was held in June 2023. The support work is now continued by Carol as ASPIA Partner Support, and partner gatherings are held every three months in Sydney.

ASPIA's Purpose

ASPIA's purpose has always been to acknowledge the difficulties and differences in an Asperger (Neurodiverse) marriage, and to provide objective information on how Asperger syndrome impacts a relationship and what steps can be taken to reduce the confusion, conflict and crushing emotional experiences that characterise the private lives of those affected.

Meeting and speaking with other partners face-to-face brings an enormous sense of validation for our experiences, which can become an invaluable source of strength and inspiration.

Our intention was never to catastrophise the difficulties in an Asperger marriage and bring about its downfall. In fact, many partners have been helped by gaining an understanding of Asperger syndrome, which has enabled them to change their expectations of their partners, and to strengthen themselves and their relationships.

With knowledge and support, those who've been unable to stay with their relationships testify to finding a place of closure for all their confusion, pain and sense of failure.

ASPIA recommends seeking professional help

ASPIA has always strongly recommended that partners seek help from a professional experienced with Autism/Neurodivergence in adults and relationships. There is guidance that can be given in this context that a support group or written information cannot give, and specific characteristics and situations can be addressed.

At no time did ASPIA claim, nor does ASPIA claim, to be providing professional advice to its members and enquirers. Whilst all care is taken to share information from reliable sources, ASPIA does not take responsibility for the way this information is implemented in personal situations.

At all times ASPIA encourages partners and other affected individuals to seek professional advice relevant to their individual situation from a qualified practitioner such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor.

Support Group Guidelines, as read out at the commencement of every meeting over our 20 year history ...

ASPIA Inc (Asperger Syndrome Partner Information Australia Inc)

Support Group guidelines

ASPIA is a support group for partners of adults with Asperger's Syndrome and our aim is to provide validation, support and information for partners whether they wish to stay in or leave the relationship, or have already left and need some form of closure. We also welcome family members of adults on the Spectrum.

- We have come to learn that every adult with Asperger's Syndrome will have a different expression of the condition, and that this will create a different dynamic or set of circumstances in each relationship or family situation.
- The ideas that work for one situation may not work for another, but our meetings are a place where we can share ideas with each other sensitively and supportively.
- Having information and support is essential to us having the knowledge and strength to survive and do what we need to do.
- We are careful to respect each other's values and choices, and to withhold any judgment or strong views that could distress or intimidate another, including our presenters.
- And please remember confidentiality. What's shared in the group context, either face to face or online, is to stay within that context.
- Be mindful too, that many members have not disclosed to their partners, families or friends that they attend our group or suspect AS in their partner so if you see a group member in another context it would be best to not greet or acknowledge them.

Our Story – The History

by Carol Grigg, Co-Founder and President (2005)

The vision to start a support group began in the year 2000 when my own journey into awareness of Asperger's Syndrome began.

I first heard the words "Asperger's Syndrome" in July of that year, and the description seemed to explain the behaviours my own husband was manifesting. I had no idea it was related to Autism, I didn't know what autism really was anyway, and I had no idea to contact the local Autism Association for information or a referral.

The urgency to find information and advice quickly consumed me and I learned to use the internet. I launched several distressed emails to several websites, one of these being in the UK, and the response came back to contact my local Autism Association.

Another website I contacted was the Asperger Syndrome Australian Information Centre run by a wonderful guy named Mitch in South Australia. Mitch conversed with me by email and provided some life-saving answers and a priceless human connection for me.

Mitch continued to be a source of encouragement, support and inspiration for me for many years, and he was very supportive of our support group, listing it on his website to help partners find us. I believe it was also during this time that I was made aware of the FAAAS website in the USA (no longer operative) where much helpful information was provided.

The NSW Autism Association, now known as Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT), was able to provide me with the names of several psychologists in Sydney. In October 2000 we consulted with one of these psychologists, and a very wonderful and supportive connection began and continued.

It was through this psychologist that I was given the opportunity early in 2001 to meet Lyn, whose husband also had Asperger's Syndrome. Lyn and I became firm friends instantly and experienced together those first amazing feelings of validation and relief that come when you finally find someone who knows what you're talking about, who lives through the same experiences and you don't have to try and describe the context or behaviours or suffer the knock-back or minimisation or skepticism or rejection that you experience from people who don't know the experience.

Gradually, through an online mailing list and by leaving contact details with the Autism Association, we began to build up a small group which, by early 2003, had grown to around six. We would meet from time to time and have coffee or picnics and found these times to be like a life-line for us.

In May 2003, the Autism Association held a Partner Forum at Macquarie University during Autism Awareness Week. There were about 24 partners in attendance at this forum and we all came away excited and inspired by having been together and shared our experiences.

It was at this forum that Psychologist Anthony Warren of the Autism Association allowed me to announce and launch GRASP, a support group for spouses and partners (and ex-partners). We commenced meetings on 7 June 2003 at Parramatta RSL Club, who allowed us to use the Lachlan Room free of charge.

In January 2006, needing a new venue due to larger numbers, we moved our meetings to the College of Nursing at Burwood (NSW).

The idea of a support group was born from those first feelings of desperation at not being able to find someone nearby who understood and could help. A passion began to grow within me to do something to help others, to somehow be or provide a connecting point for others at the beginning of their journeys.

Since our commencement in 2003 the attendance at our meetings grew from five or six to an average of 25. Our contact list grew to around 500. We had regular contributions from a number of excellent Sydney-based psychologists.

Incorporating as an Association had been a dream for a long time, but as a group and also as individuals, I don't believe we were ready for that step until 2005. There are many things that are possible to achieve from the springboard of being a legal entity.

Our priority, as always, was to continue to provide information and support to those who enquire or attend our meetings, but other priorities involved the need to increase awareness within our general community and urgently among those in the help professions, particularly counsellors, psychologists, doctors and psychiatrists who are often the portal through which many couples and partners seek help and where Asperger's Syndrome/Autism was not and is still not being recognised or identified in people's situations.

News Item - Australia Day Honours List 2014

In 2014 the Australia Day Honours List named Carol Grigg, Coordinator of ASPIA, as a recipient of the Order of Australia Medal for "service to families affected by Asperger Syndrome".

The nomination in 2013 celebrated the 10th anniversary of ASPIA, the partner support group co-founded by Carol.

Carol said she hopes that the award can help to bring further credibility to the message "that Asperger Syndrome is real, it happens to normal families, it's subtle but very significant and affected families need acknowledgement and appropriate support".