

Asperger's Syndrome in Relationships: Is there Hope?

By Carol Grigg OAM

It is difficult to write about the realities of relationships affected by Asperger's Syndrome without risking offence to people with Asperger's Syndrome.

It is important however to pause a moment and focus on the reasons for writing about relationships affected by Asperger's Syndrome and why there is such a need for information and validation for all parties concerned.

The reasons for writing about relationships affected by Asperger's Syndrome are because these relationships are confusing and difficult and can involve great stress, grief and trauma for both partners, and any children of the relationship.

Different cultures

The reality is that the person with Asperger's Syndrome and the person without Asperger's Syndrome are as different from each other as people from completely different cultures. We may look the same from the outside, but underneath we are driven by completely different priorities, needs and perceptions. It's deeper than just the differences that normal relationships struggle with.

Whilst it is evident that many people with Asperger's Syndrome do desire to be in relationship and enjoy social situations, it would seem that this is not a priority for them in the same way that it is for people who do not have Asperger's Syndrome.

People with Asperger's Syndrome generally seem to approach things with a system or formula and be more focused on a particular interest, project or task than on relationship with the people around them. For people who do not have Asperger's Syndrome, their relationships are their life-blood and all interests are undertaken in the context of social connectedness in some way.

Immediately this displays the chasm between the two worlds or cultures and goes a long way to explaining the difficulties, strain and unhappiness that characterise most relationships formed between someone who does have Asperger's Syndrome and someone who does not have Asperger's Syndrome.

Who's to blame?

Rather than assigning blame either way, perhaps it is helpful to just begin to adopt the attitude that it's completely understandable that the two worlds are scarcely compatible. It's not about defect. The majority of people with Asperger's Syndrome are enormously gifted in specific fields so they're not inferior. The problem begins because people from the two cultures, namely Asperger and non-Asperger, form a relationship and expect to forge a solid, mutually satisfying conventional marriage relationship. Asperger's Syndrome creates challenges in relationship particularly because the person with Asperger's Syndrome does not have the same relational needs as the non-Asperger partner and he or she is mostly unable to instinctively recognise or meet the emotional needs of his or her partner.

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Do we give up?

Does this mean that people who have Asperger's Syndrome should not form marriage relationships with people who don't have Asperger's Syndrome? Should those who are already married face the reality and give up?

My experience in support work with partners indicates that there are countless marriages in serious trouble because they haven't had knowledge of Asperger's Syndrome in time to avoid forming seriously dysfunctional relationship patterns. These dysfunctional patterns daily threaten to destroy the relationship and both partners, particularly the non-Asperger partner. How many more marriages are still "in the dark" about the presence of Asperger's Syndrome in their situation? How many marriages have already been lost, and to this day the partners have no idea that the difficulties were caused by the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome?

Perhaps Asperger's Syndrome in its most honest and purest form is quite amenable. Perhaps it is the denial, the complex and multi-layered coping mechanisms and defensive strategies that make Asperger's Syndrome so difficult to live successfully in relationship with.

Normal expectations of marriage

People who do not have Asperger's Syndrome enter a marriage with the normal expectation that the marriage relationship will be the priority and will be about togetherness, mutual terms and meeting of needs. From the stories I have heard it seems that people with Asperger's Syndrome also have this expectation, at least in theory, but countless testimonies indicate that in reality by some process of attrition the relationship ends up being more one of practicality and convenience for the person with Asperger's Syndrome than for the loving and meeting of emotional needs of the marital partner.

A sentiment expressed by some non-Asperger partners is that they feel their Asperger partner must have analysed them prior to marriage and assessed them as being capable of filling a compensatory role for his or her own social, relational and functional deficits. The non-Asperger partner unwittingly becomes the social bridge and interpreter and often fills the role of personal assistant. In the privacy of their relationship, the person who does not have Asperger's Syndrome will more than likely be physically and emotionally drained, working overtime to mediate relationships for his or her partner and keep life on track for both of them. Perhaps the relationship has taken on more of the characteristics of a business partnership or arrangement.

For those who had normal expectations of the mutuality of marriage, there will be bitter disappointment, a sense of betrayal and a feeling of being used and trapped. Instinctively they know that their partner needs them to carry out these vital roles for them, but feelings develop that the relationship is about the needs and interests of the person with Asperger's Syndrome and that there is not even room for their own needs.

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It is these sentiments that set up the hostility expressed by non-Asperger people towards those who have Asperger's Syndrome. Many partners feel that they are daily sacrificing their own values and losing their own souls and sense of self to help fulfill the priorities of the partner who has Asperger's Syndrome. They begin to feel that they have lost their individuality and identity and are entirely defined by the role they fill for their Asperger partner. There's a sense that there is no mutuality, no equality, no justice, no hope.

What is the answer? Is there hope?

I see the only hope for relationship as being contained within the *willingness of the person with Asperger's Syndrome to gain as much insight as possible into the realities of his or her differences, recognise the impact this has on his or her relationship, seek professional guidance and co-operate with his or her partner to develop a more healthy mutuality in the relationship.* Surely this has to be a condition of entering marriage or continuing in an already established marriage. "How can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Biblical quote)

Ignorance of Asperger's Syndrome

So how do we move on from the impasse that still exists between the two communities? I believe most of this is caused by the ignorance of Asperger's Syndrome that still exists within our communities and professional services. No-one knows enough about it to be able to identify it when they are confronted by it and very few have an adequate understanding of it. Those with Asperger's Syndrome are afraid of being labelled or seen as defective. Those who realise they are living with someone who has it are either disbelieved or crushed by the lack of support and professional help.

People with Asperger's Syndrome can tend to be militant and hold rigidly to what defines them as individuals. They can be very interesting and often likably eccentric. They may have a tendency to claim victimisation from those who do not have Asperger's Syndrome, while they determinedly continue to navigate life and relationships on terms of their own rather than mutuality and compromise. People who do not have Asperger's Syndrome continue to long for the mutual meeting of emotional needs within the marriage and resent the reality of living on terms dictated by the needs and priorities of the partner with Asperger's Syndrome. In effect, their flexibility is exploited by the inflexibility of the person with Asperger's Syndrome.

Of course marriage should not be exclusive to those who do not have Asperger's Syndrome.

However, in the same way that any individual on this earth is responsible to gain self insight and work on character defects that impact on their relationships (if they wish to stay in a relationship!), so also is the person with Asperger's Syndrome responsible to gain self-insight and work on defects that impact their relationships. The differences and deficits may be part and parcel of Asperger's Syndrome, but marriage is about both partners taking responsibility for the well-being of the relationship and each other's emotional needs.

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If a person with Asperger's Syndrome can't promise the mutuality, relationship and personal sacrifice that is a reasonable expectation within a marriage, then marriage may not be for them. If they are already married, then the least they can offer their partner is honesty and co-operation to find more mutual terms.

Most of the non-Asperger partners I've met are genuinely looking for reasons to stay with their Asperger partners, not leave them. They are looking for strategies and pathways that will ease the conflict and stress points and enable the relationship to improve. From the stories shared in our support group we have learned that some relationships can be improved by the partners negotiating terms and trade-offs and even partial separation (maybe still under the same roof).

I often wish I could personally meet with all the Asperger partners represented by our group and somehow convey to them how loyal their partners are, how hopeful they continue to be that the relationship can be improved and what positive contribution they can have to this process.

Sadly, so many partners with Asperger's Syndrome remain in denial about their Asperger characteristics and the negative contribution they are having in their relationship. They don't seem to have realised that the truth can actually make us free – free to grow, free to heal, free to live, free to love in whatever way we are capable, even if this involves a slightly unconventional approach. Denial is self-defeating and puts a brick on the entire relationship, threatening its very survival.