



Asperger's Syndrome in Marriage

(Aspia's Marriage Brochure © ASPIA 2006)

Over the last decade many people would be aware that there has been an upsurge of awareness and diagnosis of Autism and Asperger's Syndrome. Most of the cases being identified are children. Their behaviours are often exposed and uninhibited, allowing for ready identification and appropriate intervention and assistance to take place. Improved behaviour & communication patterns in turn enable more successful adjustment into adulthood.

What many people will not be aware of is that there is a second wave of identification taking place within the adult population. For adults with Asperger's Syndrome, their behaviours since childhood have gone "underground" and layers of coping strategies and defence mechanisms greet the social world. These behaviours often give the impression of someone quite "together" - perhaps a little eccentric or odd - but passable because of their high intelligence, impressive knowledge, high integrity and particular flair or gift in an area or career, such as engineering, telecommunications, computers, art, religion, politics, etc.

Many adults with Asperger's Syndrome do marry and have children. Marriage often follows a period of "ideal" courtship. However the experience of the partners and children are quite different to what most partners would experience and expect. Partners of an adult with Asperger's Syndrome often have awareness early in the marriage that something is not right but they can't work out what. They often speak of being aware that something, like a piece of a puzzle, is missing.

Partners with Asperger's Syndrome (AS)

The partner with Asperger's Syndrome can manifest a wide range of varying behaviours with varying intensities. However feedback from their partners in marriage suggests there are many common threads in their experience of marriage.

Below is a list of some common characteristics of the marriage experience and of the partner with Asperger's Syndrome, as described by members of the ASPIA Partner Support Group:

- An essential need to have things done in a prescribed manner or order.
- A tendency to correct and instruct those around them.
- Seeming to be experiencing "normal" situations differently, noticing different things and having to deal with different priorities which often prevent co-operation and teamwork, leading to frequent conflict. As a result the relationship and communication deteriorate quickly. Efforts to reason and resolve situations often result in partners feeling that they have been dug in deeper. They often feel that their efforts have been fruitless and even worse, have increased the level of complication.
- Verbal combat around "technicalities" or "order" of a situation rather than the "spirit" or "essence".
- Apparent evidence that the partner with Asperger's Syndrome is not "reading" situations or people intuitively and is consequently behaving insensitively or inappropriately for the circumstances.
- The partner with Asperger's Syndrome may appear to have an air of superiority or even arrogance and an apparent lack of respect for the knowledge, credibility, expertise or authority of others. They may have high intelligence or gifted abilities in some areas but seem to lack basic "common sense" or "know-how" in other more commonplace situations.
- The partner with Asperger's Syndrome may not recognise the effort their partner is constantly contributing to the relationship to try to sustain it. They may be extremely sensitive and easily upset, and may take issue or be offended over small matters which in turn can seem to jeopardize the stability or quality of the whole relationship.
- Interests and hobbies of some partners with AS tend to take on an obsessive characteristic at the expense of all other needs, duties and relationships around them.
- There is frequently a tendency to hostility, defensiveness and retaliation if the partner with Asperger's Syndrome is challenged or thwarted.
- The partner with AS can behave intrusively.
- They may be very controlling.
- The partner with AS may take roles seriously, to the letter of the law, especially as "Head of the Home" in a family with religious beliefs or tendency to traditional roles.
- Their courtship style is almost "too good to be true".

- After marriage the partner with AS often seems to lose motivation to keep working on the quality of the relationship as though the wedding day has “completed” their pursuit, allowing them to pursue other interests.
- The spouses of partners with AS claim that their spouses often do not appear to read the needs or notice the emotions of other family members, and they don’t enquire or reach out to them. However, when they do notice a need or “we tell them about our needs, they don’t seem to know instinctively what to do to make us feel better, and they will often do nothing and remain disconnected”.
- The partner with AS may have great difficulty co-operating with others or working as part of a team or unit. They may seem focused only on what’s going on for them, and unaware of what’s going on for those around them.
- They often seem to over-react to efforts to talk over matters with them and may perceive such efforts as a personal attack.
- They often have difficulty coping or adapting around the daily “happenings” within a family situation.
- They may insist on predictability in others and in household activities, but seem to “live on a whim” themselves, leaving the family feeling uncertain all the time.
- The partner with AS may “shut-down” if they don’t know what to say or how to behave. They may disengage with partner or family indefinitely.
- They may also “melt-down” or have episodes of rage and aggression when they don’t know how to deal with circumstances, or they don’t want to discuss, negotiate, compromise or resolve situations.
- They may hold to a single method or opinion in many areas of daily life.
- Social isolation may result for the family if the partner with AS is consistently avoiding social situations. On the other hand, some partners with AS can seem like the “life of the party” and keep everyone entertained or “engaged” (willingly or unwillingly) by sharing a great deal of expert knowledge on favourite topics of interest.
- The partners of people with AS will often feel as though they should and need to “repair” social faux pas, etc created by Asperger partner.
- Some partners with AS may be very controlling and unjust with the use of family finances, or on the other hand, avoid any financial responsibility within the household completely. They can quickly run the family into financial crisis by spending excessively on special interests, collections or hobbies.

Parenting

- If a parent with Asperger's Syndrome chooses to take an interest in their child they can be very attentive and go to great lengths to assist them in practical ways.
- On the other hand, they may have trouble reading their child's needs or emotional state and may either respond inappropriately or not at all, leading to the possibility of neglect or mishandling.
- They may not always be aware of or anticipate situations of danger or neglect when caring for a child.

The Experience of the Non-Asperger Partner

Partners living in a marriage or long-term relationship with an adult with Asperger's Syndrome report feeling a deep impact on their lives in the following ways:

- Confusion
- Frustration
- Powerlessness
- Isolation
- Being disbelieved by others, including professionals
- Burn-out
- Sense of being a mediator and interpreter at home and outside the home
- Loss of sense of self
- Changes in personality in order to cope with AS partner's behaviour
- Increase in feelings of anger
- Feeling like partner won't cope without them (if we separate)
- Trapped
- Shouldering responsibility for most household matters and well-being
- Neglected emotionally
- Constantly criticized and blamed unreasonably
- Alone
- Like a single parent
- Often feel in damage control or crisis management.
- Hyper vigilance to prevent chaos and relationship breakdowns
- Verbally, psychologically and sometimes physically abused
- Efforts to build and sustain relationship constantly sabotaged by pedantic requirements of AS person.

- Depression
- Hopefulness dashed
- Sense of sadness at unrealised potential in themselves, AS partner and other family members
- Unsupported
- Often betrayed by lack of loyalty and kindness from AS partner

The Benefits of Attending a Support Group

- Being with others who “know”
- Validation of our experiences
- No need to explain, prove or justify ourselves or our experiences
- Reassurance of our own worth and sanity
- No longer alone
- Opportunity to gain more understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome.
- Regular opportunities to hear professionals speak.
- Information and feedback about other helpful services and professionals.
- Learn strategies to help us cope and manage better.
- Help us heal.
- Special Events give us opportunity to promote awareness of, and learn more about Asperger’s Syndrome.

ASPIA stands for Asperger Syndrome Partner Information Australia.

ASPIA is a support group and information source for partners of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome.

We commenced meetings in June 2003 (under our former name “GRASP”). The information we provide is not only helpful for partners, but also for anyone interested in understanding Asperger’s Syndrome in adults and relationships in general.

These days partner support opportunities are held every three months in Sydney

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