

The triad of impairment



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This excerpt from the National Autistic Society (NAS) website is chosen as it provides a good description of the kinds of difficulty that people with high-functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome experience in life. The section of the NAS website in which it appears deals with how to approach a GP to ask for a psychological assessment, the aim being to enable the individual to access the help and support that may be available if they get a diagnosis of high-functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome. Please refer to the NAS website if you feel that any of this is relevant to you.

The autistic spectrum is very broad and two people with the condition may present very differently. No one person will have all the traits but by and large most people with AS (Asperger Syndrome or high-functioning autism) will have problems in the following *three* areas:

"The triad of impairment"

1 Social communication

People with AS may be very good at basic communication and letting people know what they think and feel. Their difficulties lie in the social aspects of communication. For example:

- they may have difficulty understanding gestures, body language and facial expressions
- they may not be aware of what is socially appropriate and have difficulty choosing topics to talk about
- they may not be socially motivated because they find communication difficult, so they may not have many friends and they may choose not to socialise very much.

Some of these problems can be seen in the way people with AS present themselves. For example classic traits include:

- difficulty making eye contact
- repetitive speech
- difficulties expressing themselves especially when talking about emotions
- anxiety in social situations and resultant nervous tics

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2 Social understanding

Typical examples of difficulties with social understanding include:

- difficulties in group situations, such as going to the pub with a group of friends
- finding small talk and chatting very difficult
- problems understanding double meanings, for example not knowing when people are teasing you
- not choosing appropriate topics to talk about
- taking what people say very literally

3 Imagination

This can be a slightly confusing term. People often assume it means that people with AS are not imaginative in the conventional use of the word, for example, they lack creative abilities. This is not the case and many people with AS are extremely able writers, artists and musicians. Instead lack of imagination in AS can include difficulty imagining alternative outcomes and finding it hard to predict what will happen next. This frequently leads to anxiety. This can present as:

- an obsession with rigid routines and severe distress if routines are disrupted
- problems with making plans for the future, and having difficulties organising your life
- problems with sequencing tasks, so that preparing to go out can be difficult because you can't always remember what to take with you

Some people with AS over-compensate for this by being extremely meticulous in their planning, and having extensive written or mental checklists.

Secondary traits of Asperger syndrome

Besides the triad of impairments, people with AS tend to have difficulties which relate to the triad but are not included within it. These can include:

- obsessive compulsive behaviours, often severe enough to be diagnosed as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- these can also be linked to obsessive interests in just one topic, for example they might have one subject about which they are extremely knowledgeable which they want to talk about with everyone they meet
- phobias: sometimes people with AS are described as having a social phobia but they may also be affected by other common fears such as claustrophobia and agoraphobia
- acute anxiety, which can lead to panic attacks and a rigid following of routines
- depression and social isolation: this is especially common among adults
- clumsiness often linked to a condition known as dyspraxia. This includes difficulties with fine motor co-ordination such as difficulties writing neatly as well as problems with gross motor co-ordination such as ungainly movements, tripping, falling a lot and sometimes appearing drunk as a result

Resources

The National Autistic Society

Head Office:
292 City Road
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Autism helpline:
0845 070 4004 (Mon-Fri, 10am to 4pm)

Minicom:
0745 070 4003

Website:
www.autism.org.uk

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06/230529