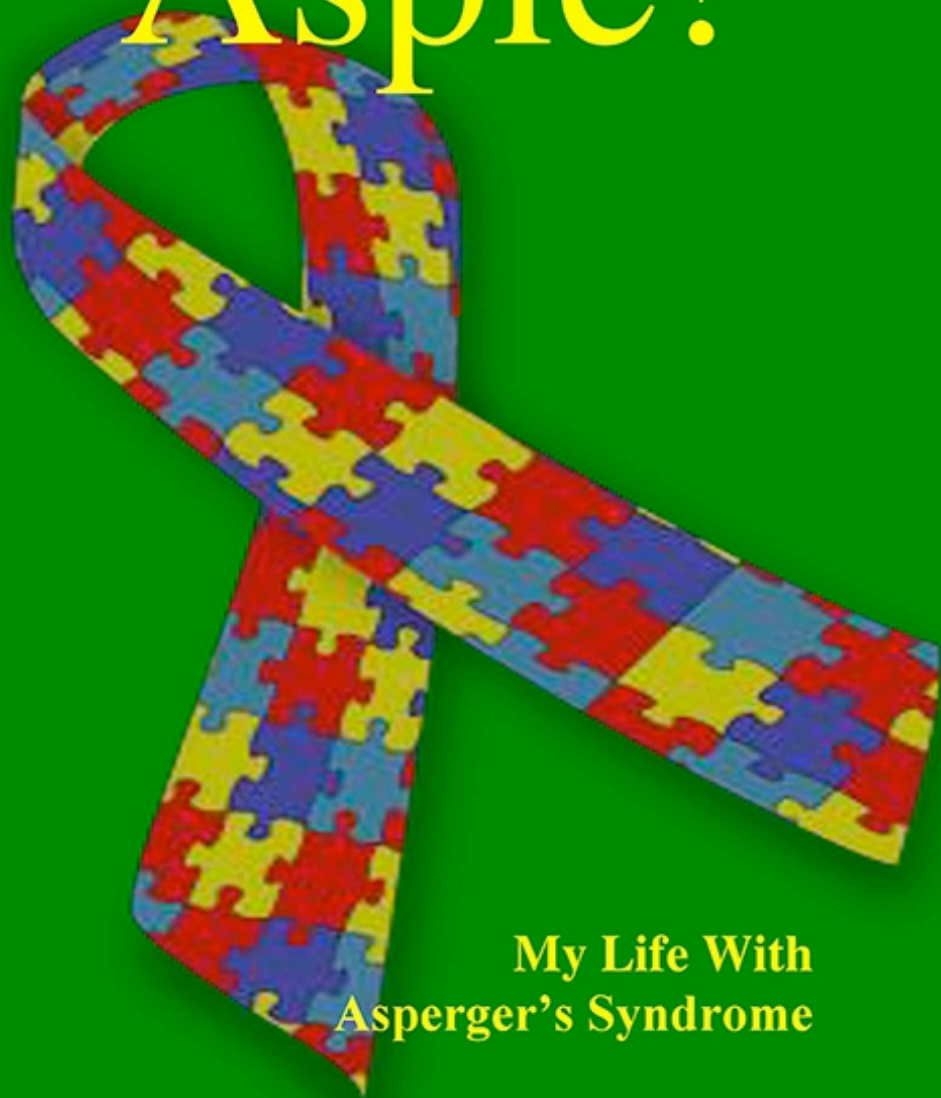


Aspie!



**My Life With
Asperger's Syndrome**

Rod Pitcher

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**For all the Aspies in the world
who are undiagnosed
and are still lost and alone

in the hope that they soon find
themselves
and each other**

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Introduction

I have read a lot of books about Asperger's Syndrome (AS), trying to get some idea of what's happening to me. I've also been looking for ideas about the way other people have coped with it, to see if any of it helps me.

The greatest conclusion I've come to is that all Aspies are different. We all seem to react differently to having AS, we all seem to have different problems with it, we all seem to cope with the problems in different ways, we all seem to be so different that I sometimes wonder if we are all talking about the same thing!

One of the problems that I have with most books about AS is that they are highly personal accounts of one person's experience. Rarely do the writers include information about other people's experience to help broaden the reader's understanding. While this approach is, perhaps, understandable, it does, at times, make the experiences recounted seem remote and too different from one's own to be relevant.

Most of the books that do provide a more general coverage of AS are written by psychologists. While this information is useful, the necessary clinical detachment with which they write sometimes makes it seem very remote and impersonal. Often the technical language can make it difficult for the lay person to properly understand.

This book is my personal account of how I see myself as an Aspie, how I deal with it, the way I am affected by it and how I have evolved a way of living with it. I also

introduce some experiences from other people's books that have helped me, as a contrast with my own, to provide a broader perspective. My experience may not be the same as yours, but I hope that in describing my experience in this book I can help you in some way.

Reading about other people's experience did help me in two very important matters that I think that it is vital for all Aspies to understand.

We are not alone. There are lots of people out there with AS. We are not freaks. We are just different.

Help is available. Any person suspecting that they, or someone close to them, has AS should get profession help and diagnosis urgently. The sooner you know for sure the better off you will be. It will help you to cope with all the problems that you will have with being, or living with, an Aspie. Don't just shrug it off: You will have problems. So the sooner you learn about them and how to cope with them the better for all involved.

I was in my 50s when I was diagnosed with AS. Finding it out changed my life. I could now understand many of the problems that had plagued me all my life.

And, most importantly, I now know that I am not alone. There are lots and lots of people, out there in the real world, just like me! I am not a social misfit who can't cope with people. I have a disability that can be dealt with.

That realisation changed my life.

I also discuss a number of other 'problems' that an Aspie might come up against, such as being considered 'not

normal' or being victimised for overly preferring their own company to mixing with other people.

There is plenty of information about having Asperger's Syndrome, living with it, and having a child or other relative who has it, available either on the internet or in books. I mention some of these at the end of this book. There is also plenty of information about how to cope with any of these situations. Some of this information is from professional sources, some is from people who have been in the situation and talk about it, to help themselves and others. You will also find blogs where you can get involved with AS to whatever depth you wish. If you look around, somewhere you will find the information that will help you.

The important thing is to not give up. Whatever help you need, coping with your own AS, or your child's, or parent's, you will find it. Someone else has been in a similar situation, and dealt with it, and is willing to pass that information onto you to help you cope.

In some ways, you are bound to be different from me and from other people, and your AS will be different from mine and their's. There is a wide variation on how AS affects people.

How it affects you is just one point on a spectrum and thus will be different from mine and almost every other Aspie. However, that does not mean that any information is useless. It just means that you have to sort through all the information until you find the bit that applies to you.

It is worth looking until you find what you need.

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This book is my answers to my questions and problems. It may not be yours. Rather, consider it to be an introduction, somewhere to start looking in your own personal quest to understand yourself as an Aspie.

I hope that you find your way. It is very important that you do. Finding out about yourself and the effects of AS on your life will help you to live with your AS.

Good luck!

Finding out I have Asperger's Syndrome

The worst part of being an Aspie is the anxiety and depression. I'm constantly worrying, either about things that might go wrong, might happen, and even about good things that are going to happen in case they go wrong. In the past all that anxiety caused me a lot of depression. Now that I know I'm an Aspie it doesn't affect me so much. Understanding myself better helps me to cope with the depression so that it doesn't hurt me so much. I still get depressed, but it's not so bad and I can cope with it without getting suicidal.

All my life I've been a worrier. My mother used to tell me that if I didn't have something to worry about then I would worry about not having anything to worry about. It used to bother me a lot, until, late in life, I found out that I have Asperger's Syndrome and that anxiety and worry are a normal part of the syndrome. I still worry and get anxious, but at least now I know why, which is some relief and helps me to cope with them.

The best parts of being an Aspie are the high intelligence and the ability to concentrate totally when I'm working. Although this doesn't always work to my advantage. I have been known to miss important appointments, and even meals, due to being so absorbed in what I'm doing.

I was in my late fifties when I found out that I'm an Aspie. I often wonder how different my life would have been if I had been told when I was young. My life was a mess – there's no other way to describe it. I spent most of my life unemployed, either because I became bored with the work and left or because I was sacked due to being so absorbed in my own thoughts that I kept making mistakes. I always found work boring because it didn't satisfy me intellectually.

I was even homeless for a time because I just couldn't cope with the world around me, particularly the people. Like all Aspies I've always had trouble relating to people. I never could understand what they meant because I couldn't read their gestures and body language. I was always making mistakes and getting into arguments due to the mis-understanding on my part.

It wasn't until I gave up trying to find work and went to university as a very mature aged student that I found something that suited me. Unfortunately, having a university degree didn't help me to get a good job because I was considered too old for the sort of jobs that new graduates usually apply for. So I went back to university and did more study, ending up with a PhD in Education and even less chance of getting work. In a way it was fortunately that by then I was getting old and suffering from a slight physical disability so I was able to sign up for the disability pension so I didn't need a job any more. It wasn't the best way to solve the problem but it did relieve me of some of my worries, such as how I was going to pay my bills.

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I put being an Aspie as most of the cause of the problems I had in life. I couldn't settle down because of the problems with dealing with people and the anxiety and worry that ensued. Being more intelligent than the people around me and being unable to hide it didn't help either.

One day I was given a book about Asperger's Syndrome by my sister who suggested that I read it. It changed my life. I recognised myself in the pages of the book. Everything suddenly fell into place. That was me they were talking about! My conviction that I was suffering from Asperger's Syndrome was later confirmed when I scored very highly in a test for the Syndrome and was properly diagnosed with it.

Finding out that I am an Aspie was liberating for me. No longer do I worry about being mad, socially and emotionally crippled or peculiar. Now I know that I'm just different from most people around me. Now I can enjoy the good parts about being an Aspie and cope better with the bad parts. And, importantly,

**I AM NO LONGER ALONE:
THERE ARE OTHER PEOPLE OUT THERE JUST
LIKE ME!**

Some notes for the parents of an Asperger's Child

The greater majority of people with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) are male. Female sufferers are fairly rare and seem to have a much milder form. Or perhaps girls can just cope with it better than boys. Thus, you are more likely to have a son who is an Asperger's Child than a daughter. But you should be aware that it can happen to girls. In either case, knowing what to expect may help you to understand better what is happening to your child when things are not going well.

AS appears to run in families but not every child will necessarily show the symptoms to the same or to any extent. Some will be strongly affected whereas others will not, apparently, suffer from it at all. However, the presence of one Asperger's Child should make you more aware that there may be others who you haven't yet recognised.

The Asperger's Child shows some typical behaviour patterns and attitudes. Asperger's Syndrome is a milder form of autism and shares some characteristics with other, more damaging, forms, but in other ways is very different.

Aspies can become very focused on anything that interests them. They get deeply involved with their own thinking and tend to shut the rest of the world out. This is one of the features of the autism side of Asperger's Syndrome. Aspies can become so involved with their own thinking that they effectively lose contact with the rest of

the world and will fail to respond to other people talking to them or being near them. Aspies tend to live in a world in their own mind much of the time. On the one hand, this concentration means that Aspies will learn very quickly if they are interested, as it means that they can shut out distractions and concentrate their minds on one subject. On the other hand, it means that, if they are not interested in the topic, they are likely to get distracted by something more interesting and lose contact with their teachers and fellow students. Thus Aspies learn quickly when they are interested, but are not good students when it comes to material that they think is boring or uninteresting.

This concentration of mind is good for Aspies that finds their interest in life and can lead to a useful vocation. However, it can also be a disability if they can't find this particular interest. They may go through their whole life searching for a meaningful occupation and never find it. They may become a drifter who never settles to anything for long, giving up on each interest as they find a newer, better one. This may make them something of a failure in life, as they will never seem to settle on a way of life that suits or satisfies them. Unfortunately, they will not be forced into a life determined by others: They must find their own way, if they can. Some Aspies find their way, others never seem to settle on anything and seem adrift all their lives. Some never settle down. Some even give up trying.

As part of this concentration on matters that interest them the Asperger's Children will often get depressed because their minds want something to work on but can't

settle on anything that interests them. Unfortunately, Aspies will often suffer a lot of depression in their lives: It appears to be an unavoidable part of the syndrome. To break this depression their interests must be engaged by someone who cares talking about their interests. This will not happen easily, and it may take some time to find which particular topic is the one to bring him back into contact with the world. When he is depressed is the time when the Aspie is most dependent on friends and carers to help find a way back to contact with the everyday world.

Unfortunately, Aspies often have trouble making friends. Their partial autism causes them unending trouble understanding and interacting with people. Aspies have trouble comprehending facial and body language and thus miss a lot in any conversation. They tend to take the spoken words as the whole of the conversation, being unaware when facial expressions don't properly match the words. This also makes it easier for others to take advantage of Aspies, and so a general mistrust of others often shows up in Aspie behaviour.

As part of that partial blindness to facial expressions, the Aspie often has trouble recognising people, either in person or picture. We often rely on other factors, such as dress or behaviour, to help us to identify people. I have been known to walk straight past a friend without recognition because he was dressed in a way that I would never have expected of him. This does not make for good nor easy friendships. However, all is not necessarily lost. Aspies can be very loyal to their friends and those who help

them cope with their disability, particularly those who understand what motivates them.

None of this should be taken to mean that we Aspies don't like people. It just means that we have trouble understanding them, although sometimes we find them very fascinating and try hard to understand what makes them act the way they do. It's just one of the problems of Asperger's Syndrome that we have trouble with social relationships. Unfortunately, some of us give up trying to understand people, thinking that it's just too hard. This again, makes it hard to form friendships, and we get the reputation of being loners, misanthropes or dropouts. Life can sometimes be very lonely for an Aspie.

The above is taken mainly from what I have seen happening to myself over the years. I have no formal qualifications in psychology (my PhD is in Education) so it is from the point of view of a layman who happens to have Asperger's Syndrome and has watched the way it has affected his life. More of an insider's view of his own experience than a clinical one.

If you suspect that you have an Asperger's Child then you should seek professional advice, the sooner the better. The sooner your child knows about his disability the sooner he can come to terms with it and learn to cope. From my experience, not knowing that you have AS is the worst part of it because you don't know what is happening to your life and why.

The later in life that you learn about having AS the harder it is to make the adjustment. Also, learning early

might avoid a lot of pain and suffering. On the other hand, even finding out later in life can help. When I found out that I am an Aspie, which happened in my late 50s, a lot of things suddenly fell into place. I had a much better understanding of my past life and why I am the person I am. I am too old now to bother about any treatment, but simply knowing the truth helped me to understand and cope with my disability.

Knowing that there are other people out there just like me helps me to cope with my condition. The best way you can help your Asperger's Child is to let him/her know that s/he is not alone, that there is help available, that you care what happens to her/him, and that you will help him/her to make what life they can, on their own terms and in their own way.

Teach your Asperger's Child not to be ashamed that he is partly autistic because he has Asperger's Syndrome. It is not his fault, nor anyone else's. It is just the way things are and he should enjoy the good bits and learn to cope with the not so good. And, with whatever help he needs, try to get the best out of his life. We all need help at times. The Asperger's Child is no different, he just needs the right help that suits his needs. The best place to find that help starts with caring and loving parents.

Your Asperger's Child is going to have to live in a Non-Aspergers' world. Don't be over-protective. He needs to experience it to learn to cope with it. Let him do that. Just be ready, holding out a helping hand, when he finds it too much to cope with.

Teaching the child with Asperger's Syndrome

Children with Asperger's Syndrome aren't like other children. I was such a child, unknown to me or anyone else, and I suffered for it. Of course, in my day, no-one knew about those types of Autism Spectrum Disorders, so I didn't receive any help to cope with my problems. Instead I was left to make my own way, and often I made a mess of it.

Although I was a reasonably good student in subjects that interested me, I was hopeless in those that didn't. Like most Aspies, I am fairly bright, but that didn't stop me doing badly in some areas. In fact, it often got me into trouble because I was easily bored by subjects that didn't grab my interest. If I wasn't interested I would get bored and would play up. I must have been a pain for some of my teachers.

When I did do well, either in class or on the playing field, I didn't know how to cope with being a winner because of my lack of social skills, so I usually made a mess of that too. I was not a popular person at school and didn't fit in at all well.

I had a lot of trouble with my school life. I never felt a proper part of any class or group. I always knew that there was something different about me, but couldn't understand what it was. Thus I didn't fit in well with my peers, which had an affect on my learning. I learnt well, when I was interested, but had no-one to talk to most of the time to develop my understanding of how it all related to me.

The Aspie child is the one who always stands out through not fitting in with her or his peers. S/he will usually be alone when others are forming groups, and will be the last one chosen to be a partner in games. It is a lonely life for a child suffering from Asperger's Syndrome. They need all the help they can get.

But the problem goes beyond learning. Aspies also have trouble with social interaction. We have difficulty communicating with people. Often this shows itself by our lack of understanding of people's facial and body expressions. We don't seem to be able to understand people's responses to us and what we say. Thus we often say the wrong thing. This can lead to bullying because we stand out, and, due to our social interaction problems, we often have trouble making friends. On the other hand, when we do find an understanding friend we tend to be very loyal.

Teachers must be aware of what suffering from Asperger's Syndrome means to a child, both as a student and person. There are many books available, both from the point of view of sufferers and carers, that can help in this understanding. Teachers must make it their business to understand Aspies, so that we can learn and keep up with our peers educationally and socially. Today there is all sorts of help for Aspies and their teachers, which, unfortunately, was not available in my days at school.

Unfortunately I didn't learn that I have Asperger's Syndrome until fairly late in life, well after my schooling had ended. I often wonder what difference it would have made if I had known earlier. I might have been a better

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student and enjoyed school much more. In those days, though, there was no special treatment for people with Autism Spectrum Disorders because no-one knew much about them, so it might not have made much difference.

The problem child: Whose problem?

Children with Asperger's Syndrome are sometimes (often?) classified as 'difficult' because they don't conform to the behavioural characteristics of 'normal' children. They are a problem just because they are different, whereas in fact, they need special attention because of their difficulties. In the next chapter I consider what we mean by 'normal', but here I am talking about 'problem children', as they are called. Having been a 'problem child', due to having AS, for much of my life I know what it is like being the 'problem child'.

We are often told that there are no 'problem children' only children with special needs. Fair enough, but using an euphemism doesn't void nor solve the problem. When those special needs aren't provided for, they do become a problem, usually for the teacher, who often has neither the training, time, nor facilities to provide for the special needs. In that case, they (both the teacher and the child) require proper professional help from a psychologist or social worker. In some extreme cases, legal advice might also be required.

Some teachers are complaining that they spend more time dealing with problem children than they do teaching their classes. Not only are they not trained for that job, and thus unable to do it adequately, but the loss of time spent teaching is impacting on the other students in the class to their detriment. Teachers are there to teach not to be social workers. The job of dealing with problem children and their

parents belongs to psychologists and social workers, not teachers.

Parents of problem children are often as much a problem, perhaps through no fault of their own, as the child. It seems that many parents of autistic and similarly challenged children will just not admit that there is a problem. It appears that they don't want to admit to having a less than perfect child, and thus will not accept the advice to have him/her properly investigated and diagnosed. Lack of correct diagnosis means that the education system does not know how to treat the child nor what sort of special treatment and teaching might be available to deal with the problem.

True, sometimes the parents' reluctance is due to the cost of investigation and diagnosis. It can be a very expensive process, and may sometimes be problematic. If each school had its own psychologist then this would help alleviate the problem, since professional advice would be available at the source of the problem, rather than when it is moved to a consulting room. The parents then might have more incentive to follow up the preliminary findings.

Even when a diagnosis is made and help offered, parents often seem reluctant to transfer their child to a special school where her/his needs can be properly dealt with, even though it would be of most benefit to the child. This reluctance is a problem that might be solved by an in-school social worker or psychologist who has the professional knowledge and standing to deal with the parents' reluctance and advise them of the best outcome for

the child. Since teachers are not trained as social workers nor psychologists they are professionally unable and unqualified to perform this role.

Some problem children will probably remain in ordinary schools and classes, either because that have slipped through the gaps in the diagnosis procedure or for other reasons. They must be dealt with by the teacher, and wherever possible integrated into the class. If, however, the teacher has professional advice on hand at the school, and can call on a psychologist or social worker to observe the problem child in situ, in the classroom, it will be easier to find a solution to the problem that best suits all parties.

The problem of a problem child in a class is not one that the teacher is professionally trained to deal with. His/her role is to teach. The problem child should be dealt with by those people professionally trained to do so, the psychologists and social workers. That would be the best situation for all involved – the child, the teacher, the parents, and the school. It would be best achieved by the placing of psychologists and social workers as full-time consultants in all schools.

The need is for more professional psychologists and social workers in schools, or at least available to schools at any time they need them. Only that way will the problem child get the special attention that s/he requires. Expecting a teacher to supply the proper level of support is not providing for the needs of the teacher nor the child.

Whether the child is autistic, overactive, gifted, or has some other learning or cognitive problem, s/he requires,

and is entitled to, special treatment so that s/he can achieve the best results of which s/he is capable. That requires more than just ordinary teaching. It requires specialised teaching that provides for the child's special and individual needs.

The problem child is everyone's problem. No one person is qualified to deal with all aspects of the problem, from behaviour to treatment to special education. It requires professionals in a number of fields to co-operate and to work together with the parents and teachers of problem children, to provide a satisfactory resolution which best addresses the causes and implications of the problem.

What is ‘normal’ anyway?

The concept of what is ‘normal’ has changed over time as society has changed. This applies in any field one cares to think about. What is important to us as teachers and educators is the concept of the ‘normal’ child. This too has changed over time, especially since the introduction of compulsory education in the nineteenth century. The idea was always that students must conform to some concept of ‘normal’ to receive the best in education. Unfortunately, for most of the time those students who did not conform to what was expected as ‘normal’ behaviour did not receive fair treatment and often suffered punishment or expulsion. In the process they also failed to receive an education and so left school poorly equipped to take their proper part in adult society.

Even today, education authorities have some idealised picture of the ‘normal’ student and direct the best efforts and resources at the education of those students. Any child not ‘normal’ suffers. This situation is changing, although it looks very patchy in parts. There are some efforts to deal with children not seen as ‘normal’ with special classes. However, these ways of dealing with such children often seem to the outsider as inadequate, or, worse still, they sometimes mark the child as abnormal in a pejorative way, and treat them as such.

One of the ways in which children can be differentiated is by their being ‘gifted’. This is a category

that is sometimes difficult to define. Most efforts in the past came down to differences in social class or hereditary. Most modern researchers agree that a child being gifted in one area does not mean that s/he will be gifted in all areas. A child that is gifted in maths may be no different from others in music. There is some disagreement on what makes a child gifted but it is most often put down to interest in a subject, encouragement from home or a psychological inclination. One of the main problems is that no-one is yet sure how to measure these things in a way that is particularly meaningful or predictable. Whatever causes them, gifted children need special attention. They are actually being discriminated against since they aren't being educated to suit their needs.

The other type of child seen as not 'normal' is the disruptive or troublesome one. These children are often diagnosed with some psychological malfunction such as ADHD or similar. They are then put on medication to stop them disrupting the class. The trouble then is that many do not actively take part in the class because they are incapable of paying attention due to being tranquilised. Thus they are not getting an education. They are merely being kept quiet so that the other children can be taught. These children are also being discriminated against since many of them are not receiving much at all in the way of education.

There is some disagreement as to just how many children need special education. Most children seem to cope fairly well with being treated as 'normal' or 'average' and being in an ordinary class, but whether or not they are

all getting the best in education or whether some or many are receiving less than their due is unknown. Some way of testing this situation is needed to better find out.

It may be that many more children than previously thought need some extra support. Current research into education methods and teaching are trying to resolve the problem of the child who does not fit the idea of the 'normal' student in various ways. It has been a problem since formal schooling began, but it is not yet solved. Only when it is solved and when education can be fitted to the individual student will everyone receive the best education to which they are entitled.

The two types of children mentioned above as not fitting in with the current idea of 'normal' need special education. This would involve special schools and/or classes where the teachers are specially trained to deal with them. In some cases this might involve each teacher dealing with only one child. Unfortunately, the powers that control the education purse strings would balk at the expense of such special treatment. Thus the discrimination against children who are not considered 'normal' students will continue. That the current system of education does not prepare these students for their future adult life appears not to be a major consideration of those who design and run the current education system.

But 'normal' is a culturally and temporally changeable characteristic. It was different in the past and will surely be different in the future. Just how it will change in the future is problematic and probably indeterminable, until it

happens. What 'normal' will mean in the future and how it will change is unknowable at the present. However, what is sure is that the education system must change in step with what is seen as 'normal' at any particular time if it is to provide the best and appropriate education to all children. Those who do not fit the 'normal' mould must be treated in ways that compensate for their differences to ensure that they get the best education.

Some children need to be alone, but they are not necessarily lonely nor anti-social

Some children need to be alone with their own thoughts without being interrupted by other people. It does not mean that they are lonely. They may be quite happy, maybe even happier, when they are alone. Aspies tend to be people who dislike social interaction, preferring to be alone much of the time.

I remember, through the school years and for a long time after, being often in trouble because I would rather be alone than mixing with other people. I was called ‘stand-offish’, ‘unsociable’ and even considered mentally unbalanced by many teachers and even at some times by my parents. Even though all these people tried to make me sociable and to mix with my peers, I didn’t want to. I much preferred to be alone.

When I was alone I could listen to my own thoughts without being interrupted. I could work out things in my mind and keep myself occupied with things to think about. That all of this activity was in my mind didn’t bother me. I was happy to be alone with my thoughts.

If I did seek out other people it was not due to loneliness. Sometimes I would run out of creative thoughts and get bored. Then I would look for someone to talk to, hoping to get some inspiration to start my thoughts off along some new and interesting pathway. Most of the time I

was disappointed as I found most people's thoughts and conversation boring and uninteresting. So I would go back to being alone where I could provide my own mental stimulation.

The child who wishes to be alone in class or in the playground might be like me. Perhaps s/he wants to be alone to explore his or her own thoughts without interruption.

By all means, if the child is unable to deal with social relationships there might be some reason for concern and possible exploration and treatment. But if the child chooses to be alone and is happy being so, then there seems little reason for worrying unduly.

In his book, *Solitude*, Anthony Storr describes many of the advantages that being alone can give to the creative person. He shows that the desire for solitude is not a mental aberration nor a vice. It is part of everyone to some extent, but much more to some people than others. He shows how many of the great creative people of the past could not have achieved their greatness without their desire for, and appreciation and use of, solitude.

So, the child who loves solitude may be an, as yet undiagnosed, genius. Even if s/he isn't such a person, perhaps s/he has learnt the beauty and usefulness of solitude. Perhaps s/he has learnt to ability to get as much out of his or her mental life as from mixing with people with whom s/he feels bored. Perhaps this feeling for solitude should be encouraged rather than discouraged.

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Having been this way all my life I am not bothered about it, except when people, probably well-meaning ones, try to make me mix socially with people I don't want to know. The most annoying are those who try to get me to give up my solitude, the best part of my life. I wouldn't give it up for anyone!

Going to university

In my day there was no help for Aspies at school, mainly because no-one knew anything about it, including teachers. I had to make do, cope as well as I could and try to learn. This was alright for subjects that interested me, but the others were a dead loss.

Today's children are much luckier. Teachers know what to look for and help in coping is available at most schools.

As it happened, I failed my final year at school. This was a big disappointment as I would have liked to have gone on to university. Anyway, I gave up and went and found a job. But my desire to go to university never went away.

When I got a bit older, I found that universities in Australia (and perhaps other countries) have special consideration for mature-aged applicants. In fact, in Australia, there is a mature-aged or adult test that can be taken by anyone, and through which one may gain entrance to the university. I decide to have a go.

It was pointed out that the test did not rely on remembering things, but was a test of thinking and being able to work out the right answers. Sounded good to me as I had always been good at working out things, but bad at memorising them.

On the day of the test we were told that we would be allowed three hours, and that we shouldn't worry about not

finishing it as it was designed not to be finished. As it happened, I finished the test in about half an hour and scored 96%, so I must have done something right. In retrospect, it seems to me that the test was ideal for and seemed almost designed to suit Aspies.

Anyway. I got my place at the University of Adelaide, in South Australia, where I read anthropology and philosophy. Looking back, I would say that my four years at Adelaide University were the happiest I had ever had in my life up until then, although more enjoyable university work was to come later as I continued my studies. University study obviously suited me. I didn't do anything particularly outstanding, but I did do very well and achieved what I wanted to do. Many 'normal' students had a lot more trouble than I did. I put it all down to being an Aspie and that I was doing what I wanted to do, and doing it well, which made a very nice change!

I later went on and did more university study, and enjoyed it all. It seems to me that Aspies have a predilection for it. It seems to suit our way of thinking and working, as it goes beyond merely memorising facts and encourages us think and ask questions: Something which we Aspies are good at. We always want to know more than we are being told. At the university we are taught, and even encouraged, to go out and find the answers we want, and, even more important, how to ask the right questions.

The important point here is that, if you want to go to university, don't let being an Aspies stop you. If you don't get the proper qualifications at school to gain entry, try the

mature-aged entry test, and you will probably do much better. When you get to university you will probably find that being an Aspie is no longer a disadvantage, and may even be an advantage.

University study suits us. Being able to concentrate deeply on what we enjoy doing, to shut out the world of distractions, gives us a great advantage over ‘normal’ people when it comes to university study. Being an older Aspie doesn’t seem to be a problem at university. The way of working there seems to suit us.

Unfortunately, by the time I got my PhD I was too old to start an career as an academic researcher. I think that it would have been a very good career for an Aspie.

I was in my late forties when I did the mature-aged entry test, and look where it got me! Given the opportunity, I was able to achieve something which is beyond the ability of many ‘normal’ people. Just because you are an Aspie doesn’t mean that you have to be second-best. You can be a winner. Your way might be different from mine, but all you need to do is find your niche in life and work at it.

Looking for patterns in everyday life

One of the traits of many people with Asperger's Syndrome (Aspies), like me, is that we spend a lot of time looking for patterns in the numbers all around us. For some reason, to do with our disability, we are fascinated by patterns, particularly in numbers. Pointing out patterns that I have seen sometimes gets me odd looks from non-Aspies, but I'm not worried. I look on pattern seeking as one of the interesting and intriguing points of being an Aspie.

My favourite occupation, when out walking or driving, is looking at car registration numbers. Most, of course, have no patterns in them, other than the simple pattern of letters and numbers that depend on where you live. For instance, here in Australia, many of them are a series of three letters followed by three numbers: Nothing much interesting in that! I keep looking anyway, and sometimes I find one that interests me. Mostly I just admire the pattern, but sometimes it starts me thinking about other things that might also be related to it or the chances of it happening.

One day when I was out driving and stopped at traffic lights, I noticed that the two cars in front of me, in adjacent lanes, had consecutive registration numbers. I had never, in forty years of driving, seen that before. I wondered: What are the chances of it happening again? I don't know what the chances would be, and wouldn't know how to work them out, but I would think that they would be very, very

low. Perhaps it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that will never happen to me again.

Shortly after buying a second-hand car a few years ago, I realised a similarity between the registration number and my sister's phone number. Both have 888 in them. I wonder if I noticed it before I bought the car and it influenced me to buy it? I don't know. I don't think that I noticed the registration number before I decided to buy the car, but I may have done, unconsciously. I had known my sister's phone number for many years, so it might have been lurking at the back of my mind looking for something with which to form a pattern, and thus caused me to buy the car with a similar pattern in the registration number. I don't know and I don't suppose that I'll ever know, but it intrigues me to think that it *might* have happened. Perhaps being an Aspie has more influence on my life than I think.

I saw a car recently that had the registration number YBD.o8X. Not much of a pattern there, you might think. But it struck me, while looking at it, that there is a 'hidden' pattern. Consider: Read the number from both ends towards the middle. Y is like X with the bottom legs squeezed together. B is like 8 with one side squeezed in. D is like o with one side squeezed in. In other words, it is, with a little bit of mental manipulation, a palindrome, the same backwards as forwards. This is the 'hidden' pattern that I saw in the numbers and I found it most interesting and intriguing. When I told the owner of the car about the pattern I'd found in her registration number she looked at me as though I was mad. Ah, the perils of being an Aspie!

When I have to remember a phone number, I always look for some sort of pattern in the digits. If I can find a pattern, sometimes only after quite a lot of thought, I find that I can remember the number easily, but if there's no pattern that I can find, then I have difficulty recalling the number and soon forget it.

I have found this ability to seek out and find patterns can sometimes be very useful. For instance, I can sometimes see patterns in random data, particularly numbers, that other people miss. Sometimes, it happens, that there is no pattern to be found in the data, so I have to be careful not to get obsessive about it. It can sometimes be very difficult to abandon the search for a pattern, but that too is part of being the Aspie that I am.

I rather like and enjoy this tendency of mine to look for patterns in numbers. It gives my mind something to ponder upon. Wherever I might be there is usually something that might, just might, have a pattern within it that I can look for. That applies to car registration numbers, road signs, telephone numbers – virtually anything. When I'm lucky, I get the pleasure of finding the pattern. If not, I can always look elsewhere. There's plenty of numbers around in the modern world.

Looking back on my life as an Aspie

I am nearing the end of my life. What has it been like, living as an Aspie? What have been my main losses and what have been my main gains? What have I achieved in my life, and how was being an Aspie an important factor?

Most of my life was a disaster, to say the least. My parents and teachers didn't know I had AS. If anyone did know, they never told me. At that time, the mid- to late-20th Century, it is best to assume that they didn't know. No-one did, it was virtually unknown then. That is not to say it didn't happen, just that very few people knew about it. Those that did know never mentioned it, so the general public were almost entirely unaware that such a thing existed. Probably a few psychologists knew, but they didn't mention it either.

I had to make do the best I could on my own, without any help. Anyone who was not there at the time, and didn't have AS, cannot imagine what it was like, growing up 'different' but not knowing why.

I have heard it described as like being ill in a foreign country, not knowing how to act, not being able to communicate, being an unwanted and ignored nuisance. In my opinion, that doesn't come anywhere near being close to what it was really like. You had to be there.

We Aspies did not belong in our own society. I couldn't even explain to others what my problem was because they wouldn't have understood because they didn't

even know there was a problem. I was trying to grow up in a society which I didn't understand, and worse, didn't understand me.

Not that I was actively mis-treated. Many people just ignored Aspies as misfits. Most, including most teachers, thought that I was just mis-behaving and treated me appropriately. Mostly I was just ignored.

So I became a loner. While I was growing up I never got close enough to anyone to become friends. I still can't make friends, but at least now I know why. It's just the way I am and partly due to choice. I now choose not to have any friends and I don't miss something I've never had.

I never married, for reasons too complicated to go into here, but being an Aspie had a lot to do with it. Suffice it to say that, maybe if I had known earlier what I know now about AS, it might have been different. Anyway, the past has gone. 'What ifs' never changed anything. I've never missed married life because I've never wanted it, nor thought much about it.

I found working for a living almost intolerable. I spent much of my time unemployed. I would find a job interesting to start with, while there was much to learn, but too soon it became repetitious and boring. So I would leave and look for something new. This constant unrest didn't help me to find new jobs. I became virtually unemployable. At one time I was even homeless, mainly because I couldn't cope with society.

Oddly enough, one job that I did like and enjoy, and stayed at for many years, was taxi driving. This is strange,

since it meant dealing with strangers all the time. But I found that many of my passengers had interesting stories to tell, and that many of them were misfits like me. In my time as a taxi driver I learnt a lot about life, both from the inside and outside. I realised that there were many ways to fit or not fit into society, and many ways to live in society, without necessarily being an integral part of it and fitting in with it. I found out that even misfits could have a life worth living. Learning this helped me to live my own life, but I still couldn't understand why I needed to.

Then, in my middle age, I found the answer to all my problems. I found out that I have Asperger's Syndrome. I read all I could find, books, articles, websites, wherever I could find any information about AS and being an Aspie. It was a revelation: My road to Damascus. Now I know who I am and why. And that makes life so much better.

Finding out late in life that I am an Aspie was both terrible and wonderful. It's terrible because it explained my life up to now. It made me wish that I had known earlier when I could have done something about it. It was wonderful because it opened up a whole new life, what was left of it, in front of me.

If I had known as a child that I had AS and was able to get help, like today's children, undoubtedly, my life would have been very different, and, assuredly, a lot better. Perhaps I would have found my niche in life sooner. Maybe I would have gone on and become successful at something. Perhaps I would have got my academic education earlier and made a successful career of it. Or entered some other

field where being an Aspie was an advantage. Who knows? But it's not worth worrying about 'maybes' now.

Your life as an Aspie (or your child's) is probably very different from mine. You would have had many different experiences which shaped the person you are today. We are all Aspies, but we are all different. Whether you accept, or are given, help depends on you.

If you have a child who you suspect has AS, then get him or her tested as soon as possible. If the result is positive, get all the help you can. For you, and your child, all the advice and help will be worthwhile and worth having.

If, like me, you are older, you may not want much help. I accepted some counselling and a bit of advice from a psychologist. Unfortunately, much of the advice available for older people is either mistaken, or even wrong. The truth is that few psychologists have AS, so they don't really understand us, except in a theoretical way. And sometimes that theory doesn't suit us as the individuals we have become through living our lives as Aspies. Knowing all about AS and living with it are two very, very different things. In many ways, even when we know, we Aspies have to make our own way, as we have in the past. But then, we are usually good at it, having learnt the hard way.

Resources

There are many books about Asperger's Syndrome, what it is, and how to cope with it. Here I shall discuss a few such books that I have found useful or interesting. Your local library or bookshop may have these and will have plenty of others to help you. My selection here is mainly aimed at young to teenaged children and their parents, as I think that they need the most help.

Can I Tell You About Asperger Syndrome?

Jude Welton, illustrated by Jane Telford.

"Meet Adam - a young boy with A.S. Adam invites young readers to learn about AS from his perspective. He helps children to understand the difficulties faced by a child with AS - he tells them what AS is, what it feels like to have AS and how they can help children with AS by understanding their differences and appreciating their many talents. This illustrated book is ideally suited for boys and girls between 7 and 15 years of age." [Publisher's notes on back cover]

***A Parent's Guide To High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder.* Sally Ozonoff, Geraldine Dawson, James C. McPartland.**

This book gives the facts parents need about high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder, including Asperger's Syndrome. The authors describe ways to help

children grow into happy, self-sufficient adults. Parents learn practical strategies for helping their son or daughter relate more comfortably to peers, learn the rules of appropriate behaviour, and succeed in school.

I Am Utterly Unique : Celebrating The Strengths Of Children With Asperger Syndrome And High-Functioning Autism.

Elaine Marie Larson, illustrated by Vivian Strand.

What's great about having Asperger's syndrome!

Freaks, Geeks And Asperger Syndrome : A User Guide To Adolescence.

Luke Jackson

Luke Jackson is 13 years old and has Asperger's Syndrome. Adolescence and the teenage years are a minefield of emotions, transitions and decisions and when a child has Asperger Syndrome, the result is often explosive. This enlightening, honest and witty book is an attempt to address difficult topics such as bullying, friendships, when and how to tell others about AS, school problems, dating and relationships, and morality. His main reason for writing was because "so many books are written about us, but none are written directly to adolescents with Asperger Syndrome. I thought I would write one in the hope that we could all learn together".

Asperger Syndrome And Adolescence : Helping Preteens And Teens Get Ready For The Real World.

Teresa Bolick.

The lack of social skills and ability to grasp conversational nuances that characterize AS make adolescence the most difficult life stage. In *Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence*, child psychologist Teresa Bolick presents strategies for helping the ten to eighteen-year-old achieve happiness and success by maximizing the benefits of AS and minimizing the drawbacks.

Very Late Diagnosis Of Asperger Syndrome.

Philip Wylie

More adults are identifying themselves as being on the spectrum and seeking formal diagnosis and understanding of Asperger's Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorder. This book gives information about the process, the pros and cons, and the after-effects of receiving an autism diagnosis in adulthood. Combining practical guidance with advice on how to seek appropriate support services, and how to use the self-knowledge gained through diagnosis to live well in the future.

Autism And Asperger Syndrome.

Simon Baron-Cohen.

This book summarizes the current (at the time, 2008) understanding of the autistic spectrum, from Asperger's Syndrome to autism. It covers what is known about the

brain, genetics and interventions for Autism Spectrum Disorders. At the time, the author was Professor of Developmental Psychology and Director of the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge University, UK. Although the book is ten years old at the time of this writing, it is still very useful for anyone wanting an introduction to the scientific research of autism and AS.

There are bound to be web sites that you would find interesting or useful. Unfortunately, any list of such web sites would be far from complete and probably even be out of date when you see it. As in other fields on the internet, sites come and go, often quickly and without notice. The best way to find something useful is to Google “Asperger’s Syndrome” and work your way through the results until you find a site that suits you.

Some of these sites provide advice, (check their qualifications before accepting it), items of news and interest, such as book reviews or interviews with professionals, and often a forum for discussion where you can compare notes with other Aspies. As in all things internet, Be Careful, until you know who you are talking to.

It is also worth looking for a local AS support group near where you live. These groups are useful for information, help, and the chance to talk to other Aspies to compare notes, ideas and experiences. Your city may also have a Centre where you can get professional advice free or for a small charge.

Epilogue

I hope that you have found this book interesting and useful.

If nothing else I hope that the two important points I made in the Introduction help you. Remember them? If not, here they are again.

We are not alone. There are lots of people out there with AS. We are not freaks. We are just different.

Help is available. It will help you to cope with all the problems that you will have with being an Aspie. Don't just shrug it off: You will have problems. So the sooner you learn about them and how to cope with them the better.

It is most important that you know that you not alone. There are lots and lots of people, out there in the real world, just like us! Remember: We are not social misfits who can't cope with people. We have a disability that can be dealt with.

This book is my answers to my questions and problems. It may not be yours. Rather, consider it to be an introduction, somewhere to start looking in your own personal quest to understand yourself as an Aspie.

Aspie

There are many books written about living with AS, and more and more are appearing all the time. Also, there are numerous web sites where you can find personal stories, advice and people like yourself with whom to discuss your experiences, your problems and your life as an Aspie.

The best of luck with your search. I hope you find your answers as I did mine.

About the author

I live in Waramanga, a south-western suburb of Canberra, Australia's capital city.

I have six university degrees, including a PhD in Education.

I spend a lot of my time reading all sorts of things about all sorts of topics.

I will read anything that is interesting and well written.

I have a black cat named Dog to keep me company.

I have Asperger's Syndrome.

Previous publications

Most of the articles herein were specifically written for this book. Some were previously published elsewhere. The original publications are listed below. Those not listed were not previously published.

Finding out I have Asperger's Syndrome. *ASIAM*.
September 2014.

Teaching the child with Asperger's Syndrome.
EducationHQ. November 2014.

Looking for patterns in everyday life. *Rod's Whispers*
(my blog). March 2016.



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