

If I'd Known Then What I Know Now: Learning from Life on the Spectrum

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Background

I am one of those fortunate “Aspies” to have found a job in which I actually get paid to talk about my interests in great detail! In addition, I even get to give exams—one of my favorite activities—to make sure that the students have genuinely picked up on my wisdom. It doesn't hurt that the media frequently calls on me to discuss consumer marketing.

It helps that my job provides a great deal of flexibility. In my interactions with students and colleagues, I have a relatively structured way in which my need for socialization can be satisfied. On my less good days, I can “escape” back to the peace and solitude of my office after I am done with the tasks that have to be accomplished that day.

At the risk of resorting to a cliché, I have—for as long as I can remember—known that I was somehow “different.” Fortunately, I came from a family of proud eccentrics, so being unusual—even quite a bit so—was not perceived as a bad thing. Coming from a relatively privileged background, I was often able to do things in my way and on my time table. By now, I have, for example, become relatively successful in my profession, but it might be said that I have not taken a particularly “efficient” path toward this outcome.

At age thirty-one, I suspected that I might suffer from attention deficit disorder (ADD) due to certain attentional problems I have been experiencing throughout my life. For example, I had always had difficulty with computationally intensive mathematics tasks such as matrix algebra. Although many people might have to replay their voice mail messages once or twice, I would often have to rehear the messages several times just to pick up on a simple seven or ten digit telephone number. In addition, I have often had problems with short term memory. Therefore, in 1996, I went to see a

psychiatrist who specialized in ADD. I was given several computer tests, but I actually scored in the normal range on impulsivity, casting doubt on ADD as a diagnosis. In the second or third session, the psychiatrist suddenly said, "I don't think you have ADD. I think it is Asperger's Syndrome."

"Asperger's Syndrome?" I queried. "What is that?" When the psychiatrist said something to the effect that this was a form of "high functioning" autism, I was incredulous. "But I'm not like Raymond!" I objected. However, when the psychiatrist got out the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, I recognized that the diagnostic criteria seemed to be rather on target.

Some Things I Have Learned

Some of my learning on effective strategies of adaptation clearly started before I was diagnosed. Other learning came as I gained greater insight after my diagnosis. Here are some points:

Understanding the interrelationships between the complex symptoms of ASDs. Although this may change in the future, the *DSM* does not currently list sensory vulnerabilities as a diagnostic criterion. This, however, is often the area where we face the greatest challenges. Many people on the autism spectrum either have exceptional spatial skills or are challenged here. I fall into the latter category. It was not until I read—three years later—Liane Holliday-Willey's book *Pretending to Be Normal* that I learned about the intertwined and complex symptoms of autism.

Learning how to use strategies to compensate for challenges. Most people on the autism spectrum have serious challenges of some kind. Realistically speaking, no amount of positive thinking or "practice" is likely to make these challenges go away. In many cases, good strategies to *compensate* for these problems may be more effective—and a whole lot less stressful—than trying to "conquer" the challenge in question. Organization can be a problem for many of us. Filing cabinets may, realistically speaking, not work as a way of storing documents. If the files do not get back in time to the file cabinet, papers may be lost. Binders may be more effective—and often much more accessible. I have learned that I will only have a shot at learning the names of my students if I take photographs of those who are willing. Last semester, the university started to offer photos of students. I tried to go with those photos, but ultimately learned that the photographs taken for student IDs were not useful for me. Many had limited resolution. Over several years, certain changes—such as the growth or loss of beards or changing hair styles—made it impossible for me to generalize the photo to the present time.

Compensatory strategies may be useful in the social arena as well. Those of us who have problems recognizing and responding to non-verbal communication may be able to demonstrate our interest in others in different ways. Those of us who are good at

compiling information, for example, can develop good will and appreciation by others by making this information available to others who can use it. Those of us who have “geekier” qualities earn the eternal gratitude those we rescue from computer problems.

Understanding that having to do “manually” what to others is much more automatic can be exhausting. One thing this means for many of us is that going to cocktail parties and other social events is very real work even if it is experienced many in the general population as leisure. We need to recover from this. This means that there are many other things that for us simply may not be worth doing. For example, I ultimately realized that the trouble driving to an event may ultimately more than cancel out any pleasure that he might have had there. There are other ways to have fun. Realizing the cost of some tasks does not mean that one is selling out or setting for a less “full” life.

Appreciating one's differences from most others and their consequences. In life, we are often taught to try to “conquer” our problems. Perseverance is strongly advocated and revered. Although many people on the spectrum have chosen to target certain difficult tasks to function more effectively in society, it must also be recognized that the efforts expended on such goals might be applied to objectives that are more important to one self.

Understanding that strategies that may work well for others may not work well for one self. I have learned that trying to learn through the observation of others tends not to work for me. I need to have explicit steps broken down for me. Following a map is not realistic for me; I at the very least need to have verbal directions—specifying street names, turns, and landmarks.

Understanding that with our experiences, we must more explicitly question whether traditional goals of most people are appropriate for us. Some people on the autism spectrum have been very successful parents and have found this process rewarding. For many of us, however, having children, rather than being a joy, may be more of a burden. There are other ways for those of us who are not attracted to the idea of having children to contribute to the world.