

On the Page – ASD Community Voices



Meet Tom Jackman

Member, ASC Advisory Committee of Adults with ASDs
Representing Newfoundland

I am an adult living with Asperger Syndrome in St. John's Newfoundland. I am a board member of my local autism society, the Elaine Dobbin Centre for Autism, www.autism.nf.net as well as the Newfoundland representative on the ASC Adult Advisory Committee.

I am a strong advocate for individuals with ASD's, as you can see by my puzzle tie (the symbol for autism) and my Racing 4 Autism shirt.



I am very involved with an autism awareness organization called [Racing For Autism](http://www.racing4autism.ca). The September [Targa Newfoundland](http://www.racing4autism.ca) event, races for Autism Awareness and raises funds for the Autism Society of Newfoundland. Thanks to Ray and Julie Halleran for starting this Autism Awareness Targa initiative.



View our *Autism Hero* form at:

<http://www.racing4autism.ca/heroform.html> and contact us at racing4autism@live.ca to have the name of your autistic child put on one of the Targa 2010 cars in the form of a puzzle piece at no charge! Join with us in creating Autism Awareness. If you are able to help with corporate sponsorship of the racing team please view our sponsorship proposal at: <http://www.racing4autism.ca/RacingforAutismSponsors.pdf>

I enjoy playing curling at the St. John's Curling Club, enjoy computers, and I also use a TV camera for Rogers TV to make city hall meetings and a local talk show "Out of the Fog".

I have an interest in the field of Autism and Aspergers, and like to educate people about Asperger Syndrome as many people don't know enough about it.

Advanced vocabulary
Sensitive to criticism
Particulate topic obsession
Endless talking
Rigid
Gifted
Easily distressed
Remiss
Socially challenged

My Bio is written from the perspective of a person with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism. Some of my thoughts are different for people with non-verbal autism, as they might be looking for more of a cure or solution for autism while people on the higher end of the spectrum just need understanding and some adjustments/accommodations to help them with their lives.

Having Asperger's offers wonderful opportunities to take in all kinds of information of special interest, to remember most things very well, to think way outside the box and to be quite unique in many ways. The very high intelligence that is seen in most with AS is testament to an largely untapped gold mine of resources, talents and strengths.

A.J. Mahari

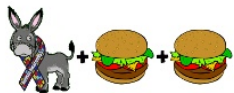
Thoughts on diagnosis...

My ASD diagnosis is Asperger Syndrome. I was going through some difficult years where doctors were misdiagnosing me with different things. When Aspergers was finally suggested I looked it up on the computer and agreed with them, and was thankful that they finally had the correct diagnosis.

In 1994, I graduated High School, so this was when Asperger was just coming into the realm of possible diagnosis. I guess this is why I was diagnosed in my adult years and not in my childhood or teen years, however knowing what I now know about Asperger Syndrome, the signs were there during my entire lifespan. It was a relief to get a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and finally get a correct diagnosis.

Through reading books, and the internet I have become very informed on the subject of Asperger. As well as attending several conferences and symposiums in the past three years. Having learned so much about Asperger Syndrome, I am able to recognize the signs of it in other children just by observing their traits and personality.

Asperger Syndrome is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and was first included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (American Psychiatric Association) under the general category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs) in 1994. In Vienna, pediatrician Hans Asperger wrote about this cluster of characteristics as early as 1944.



Asperger traits...

There is a good description of Asperger traits here:

<http://www.cbc.ca/thelens/theboyinside/asperger.html>

I have a lot of the traits listed on this website, especially these ones:

Social/Communication Traits:

** Despite a desire for friends, difficulty in initiating or maintaining close relationships*

** Very socially naïve and as a result are often taken advantage of, rejected, or bullied*

- * *Social contact may be directed by them (e.g. play is “on their terms” or not at all)*
- * *Unaware of others’ thoughts, feelings or perceptions*
- * *Communication is used for delivering information or requesting, not as a way of interacting socially*

Behavioural Traits:

- * *May respond poorly to changes, sensory stimuli, transitions, lack of structure, and restrictions*
- * *Rigid, inflexible and rule-bound behaviour*
- * *Superior ability to focus on favourite activity or area of interest (e.g., spends hours mastering video game to the exclusion of other pastimes)*

Cognitive Traits:

- * *Average to superior intelligence*
- * *Detail oriented approach to tasks which may result in missing the “bigger picture”*
- * *Difficulty seeing “parts-to-whole” and “whole-to-parts” relationships*

Associated Challenges:

- * *Anxiety, OCD and depression*
- * *Poor organizational skills (e.g., time management and planning, partializing tasks)*

I find meeting other people with similar diagnosis and traits also makes accepting your diagnosis easier as you know that there are more similar people like yourself out there.

I have learned to accept my diagnosis, and how to deal with both the strengths and cope with the associated challenges that come along with it.

Childhood...

As a child, I always had difficulty making friends, and had problems in school with being bullied, and getting along with other classmates and children. As a child I never related this to Asperger Syndrome, but now I know that Asperger Syndrome had a role to play in it.

Although I never had many friends, I still learned to have a happy childhood doing things independently or activities with my siblings.

On the teen years and high school...

As a teenager I never had a lot of friends either. I enjoyed navigating the world by myself and I am still a bit of a loner today. I enjoy being social and being in social settings, but I do have problems with developing acquaintances into friendships.

As a teen I enjoyed video games, computers and the internet. I also enjoyed some sports such as softball and cross country skiing.

Later I met other teens and adults through the local social group for adults at my autism society and through our employable thinking group.

I also enjoy talking to and meeting with the other members of the ASC Adult Advisory Committee.

Teens with ASD need to have strong support from their families, as well as possibly someone outside of their family in the form of a counsellor or therapist that they can talk to about their issues. It would also help if they had a friend, or someone who understood them and their condition that could help them try to fit in better.

The biggest challenges through the teen years are problems with a lack of friendships and relationships. This leads to anxiety and depression when young people don't have people in their peer group to talk to or associate with. Since they are not friends with their peer group they may also be out of touch and behind on fads and fashion and social realities, which can lead to them being bullied because they don't fit in.

On academic challenges in high school...

The academic part of high school wasn't too hard, the social part of high school was. Asperger people have above-average intelligence so subjects that I could read and remember (memorize) were easier than things that I had to think about. Math, physics and chemistry were more difficult because I guess they required more ability to think using "the big picture" which was difficult for me.

I never had any special support in high school, I used to take extra time writing tests and exams as my brain had more information to write down than the average student, when answering questions. Although a short answer can get the same marks as a long answer, I preferred to write the long answer.

On leaving school, trying university and joining the adult world...

University is certainly different than high school. This is where things became difficult for me! I left high school and tried university and did not do so well as I moved away from home, and lost my family support! University is also difficult as timing and organized structures are more complex with classes all over the place and not in one building. It is also difficult to meet people and make new friends or acquaintances.

It is also hard to live away from home and learn how to do things for yourself, like financial management and laundry, and to learn how to use time effectively.

The adult world is a difficult place for anyone, and it is more challenging for people with ASD because we have difficulties with the social interaction needed to get through common everyday situations.

University lacked structure -- both on my part and on the part of the university in general. I had the intelligence to succeed at university, but lacked connections with professors and others to help guide me through the courses. It was difficult to find the Prof's office to ask a question -- a person with Autism/Asperger is a little too shy to go there and ask questions so they go without an answer.

Some universities offer special support for people on the Autism Spectrum, and knowing that now, maybe that would have helped me at the time. With a special disabilities office people could have helped me a little more, helped guide me. I could have achieved more success with a little understanding and little extra support.

After university, I attended a smaller community college with a small class of six people and successfully achieved a business management diploma. Social interaction and school structure was much easier in a smaller social setting. People with ASD's need more one-on-one and they don't get this at university.

Here is a good link to more information on this subject:

<http://aspiesaurus.blogspot.com/2010/01/aspergers-from-high-school-to-college.html>

On experiences around being able to find and keep a job...

It is hard for anyone to find a job in general with the state of the economy. I find in general the job centres that people go to don't even help the neurotypical/normal people when it comes to finding a job.

I wish that there was more help so that people with Autism Spectrum could find jobs.

When I do find a job, I can usually keep it. However I work on a lot of contracts that run out after a set amount of time and then I have to try and find another contract or job.

I like to work, in part to have somewhere to go everyday which helps add daily structure and routine to my life. I like to have structure and routine, it is an Aspergers trait.

On what is needed to help people with Aspergers in the work world...

Although people with AS are usually highly intelligent and gifted it is thought that over 85% are without full-time employment. That is an outrageously high percentage. Asperger people have trouble with the social side of finding work, interviews, meeting new people, and getting along with the social picture of the office. But once we adjust we become very valuable as we have a lot to offer!

People with Aspergers and High Functioning Autism have trouble finding work and employment, which creates problems with their housing, transportation, mental health, and daily life, when they cannot secure proper employment. Employment that works must be appropriate to their valuable skill sets, and they must be properly rewarded salary wise, for what they bring to the organization or company and not be taken advantage of.

Temple Grandin, Ph.D. has some great information on job choices for people with ASDs:

<http://www.autism.com/individuals/jobs.htm>

Also try "*How to Find Work that works for People with Asperger Syndrome*" by Gail Hawkins:

<http://www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781843101512>

and the book, "*Developing Talents: Careers For Individuals With Asperger Syndrome And High-functioning*

Autism": <http://www.grandin.com/inc/developing.talents.html>

You can also check out: "*Aspergers on the Job*", by Rudy Simone":
http://www.help4aspergers.com/pb/wp_44644162/wp_44644162.html You can view an interview with her here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHmAg4EgASg>

On independent living...

I have lived independently for the past two years! Although it has been very challenging, it seems to work out for me. The ability to live independently directly relates to the need to have a job so that rent can be paid. I live in a rooming house with other normal/neurotypical people and I see, like them, financial challenges exist in obtaining enough money to pay rent, so it is not just an autistic thing.

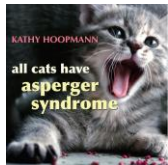
I have some trouble with time management as it relates to domestic living skills, such as cooking and laundry etc., but I manage to get by.

It is also good that my mom lives within walking distance and she is able to help with advice and support for me, when I need it.

Support in the form of a social worker, or occupational therapist, employment counsellor would also be helpful to people with ASD as well as support from their local autism society.

Thoughts on social differences...

Being aware of the fact that I have Asperger, I am also more aware of how to control the impairments or be more understanding of other people. I also try to use good eye contact when talking to people. See: http://www.autismsocietycanada.ca/images/complex_needs.JPG



I love the book, "[All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome](#)" and I carry it with me to help explain Asperger to others: "*All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome*" takes a playful look at Asperger Syndrome (AS), drawing inspiration from the feline world in a way that will strike a chord with all those who are familiar with AS. Delightful colour photographs of cats bring to life familiar characteristics such as sensitive hearing, scampering at the first sign of being stroked, and particular eating habits. Touching, humorous and insightful, this book evokes the difficulties and joys of raising a child who is different and leaves the reader with a sense of the dignity, individuality, and potential of people with AS. This engaging book is an ideal, gentle introduction to the world of AS".

Pros

- Excellent idea for explaining Asperger's to children
- Also useful for explaining it to relatives who won't sift through piles of technical material
- Cat photos are pretty darn adorable
- Puts a positive spin on AS behaviors
- Clearly a labor of love, for both children with AS and their feline friends

What can people without ASD do to be helpful in social situations when they meet someone with an ASD?

People without ASD need to be able to look past the quirky characteristics or differences of someone with an ASD, and learn that people that ASD's can still be good friends.

Here's a different perspective from the medical profession by Dr Tony Attwood...

<http://theotherside.wordpress.com/autism-awareness/good-qualities-or-aspie-advantages/>

He discusses how Asperger's Syndrome *“is NOT all about dysfunction and disability etc. There are many good points and advantages to being an Aspie”*.

What people who don't have an ASD need to know about people with ASDs...

Many people think of Aspergers as a disability, and I do in some ways. But Aspergers is also very much a culture in that Asperger people have their own interests, values, and ways of communication, just as people in foreign countries do.

The Stonking Steps website has a really good description of Asperger Culture:

<http://www.thestonkingsteps.com/asperger.htm>

and, wikiHow has some good suggestions on relation to someone with Aspergers:

<http://www.wikihow.com/Relate-to-Someone-who-Has-Asperger%27s-Syndrome>

On achieving success...

By looking at Aspergers as more of a difference than a disability and by not letting it hold me back too much I have developed into a talented and unique individual.

There are advantages to having Asperger's syndrome or even some forms of autism in some situations compared to other adults. The ability to be intensely interested in something and the ability to keep track of seemingly unrelated facts are very useful skills to have.

Just having Aspergian Pride and advocates – recognition and acceptance of myself in the autistic community as an intelligent, competent minority group with many worthwhile qualities, has helped me to be successful.

As well as continued support by family, friends and professionals.

On special or strong ASD abilities...

One of my strongest abilities is the ability to focus my mind and research something until I find the answer.

I participate in a monthly photo contest for Highway Star Magazine and am rarely stumped. I use superior internet research skills and abilities to find the location and answer for the photo contest. As you can see from the link: <http://www.highwaystarmagazine.com/lifefamilyfeature.cfm?ID=188>

In the Autism community some parents and organizations are focused on finding “cure” for ASD – how do you see this?



An interesting read is: "DEFINITION OF DUMBO" at:
http://www.jamesmw.com/on_ca.htm:

"Let us think, for example, about the story of Dumbo. Dumbo is an elephant who does not fit in because of his big ears. But wait a minute here! His big ears are not his fault.

So why should he be ostracized because of something that isn't his fault? Well, that's just the way things are, even among animals.

However, when Dumbo realizes that his big ears give him the unique ability to fly, he becomes famous and popular for it. Is the problem of his big ears cured? No. His big ears are unchanged and are still a part of him. However, what was initially regarded as a disability is now perceived as a special ability, admired by everyone."

People don't suffer from Asperger's, they suffer because they're depressed from being left out all the time.

The effort to cure autism, they say, is not like curing cancer, but like the efforts of a previous age to cure left-handedness. Some worry that in addition to troublesome interventions, the ultimate cure will be a genetic test to prevent autistic children from being born.

I don't think a cure is going to be easy to find, that's why I opt for changing the world around me; I think that does more long-term good.

However, on the other side, while we don't need a cure for Asperger's, we do need to find more help and support to help the non-verbal autistic people. *Not being able to speak* is *not* the same as *not* having anything to say.

I do feel for parents and for children with non-verbal autism and I would like to see more done to help them, so that they can become verbal, and able to lead a more independent life.



Thoughts on autism research...

Researchers must involve autistic adults in their research and their meetings and conferences and speak to them in non-medical terms in order to collaborate on their research and learn from autistics as well, about what autism and Asperger is really like.

On accepting your diagnosis:

There is a good link for information on accepting your autism diagnosis here:
<http://www.freewebs.com/aspiefrommaine/>

There is a now a whole ASD culture developing. People with ASDs are speaking up more about their experiences. There is even a new language springing up that is less medical – words like “neurotypical”, “differently-brained”, etc. Do you think this will help to empower people with ASDs?

I guess it depends on one's perspective. I think it may be easier for people with Asperger's and HFA (high functioning autism) then for others who are further down the spectrum.

As the ASC website states... *“There are some big differences across the spectrum in how much support both adults and children need. Some adults who are very independent just want to be understood as being “different”, and respected for abilities that are unique. On the other hand, many families in parts of Canada have very few resources and supports and their children sometimes have very severe communication problems, learning challenges, and sometimes severe physical problems as well.”*

What is the best way for autism organizations like ASC to advocate for more and better services and speak up about the important needs without disrespecting those with ASD who feel they are just different?

The best way to advocate is to keep listening to the people with autism, who you advocate for. Also keep the pressure on government for more funding into research and provincial budgets that affect local autism societies in our communities.

On hopes for the future...

I just want the same as a normal "neurotypical" person. A job, a house, and a family. Like the new Asperger movie, *Adam*, I want what Adam finds, a girlfriend who understands and accepts him for who he is. See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1185836/>

I need to find suitable employment and relationships so that I can lead a happy and productive life, and live the "white picket fence dream". The "white picket fence dream" is what I have named the point in one's life where you have finally reached the standard of living in a fully detached house, 2 cars, 2.5 kids (including the dog), and of course, your little white picket fence in front. Life is assumed to be very content and all goals have been reached. (Hey! Its a 'dream', work with me here).

“Although having Asperger Syndrome (AS) can make romantic relations difficult, having a fulfilling relationship with an Asperger man is certainly not impossible. Rudy Simone explores the complications of Asperger's relationships with honesty and understanding, drawing on research and personal experience to inform and advise women with AS partners. She offers helpful tips for improving the relationship and finding fulfillment both individually and as a couple”:

http://www.help4aspergers.com/pb/wp_3dcf6847/wp_3dcf6847.html

I find having Aspergers is kind of like this Taylor Swift Video, "You Belong to Me":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuNI5Y6JdUw>

I love how they don't talk, just make paper signs, I am not one to make phone calls, just emails, and texts, and blackberry messages.

They don't talk about their true feeling for each other, and with Aspergers it is even more difficult to

start a conversation or ask a girl to dance! The girl in the video, doesn't even tell him, that she has feelings for him either.

It is so neat when they both match up at the end with their "I Love You" signs!

Hopefully I can find that myself someday!

Check out Brian King: http://web.mac.com/brianrking/Im_An_Aspie/Home.html

He says...

"If you truly want to see the Aspie in your life Succeed. You need to meet them half way.

Expecting those on the Autism Spectrum to do all the work to accommodate a Neurotypical World is nonsense.

Together is the only way anyone succeeds in life.

Let's Work Together."

Brian King