

BOOK REVIEW: Asperger Syndrome- A Gift or a Curse by Viktoria Lyons

This author analyzes these famous people who she believed had Asperger's syndrome:

1. William James Sidis, possibly the most intelligent individual of the 20th century, mathematical genius
2. Kurt Godel, mathematically gifted, famous for his "incompleteness theorem."
3. Stanley Kubrick, one of the most important and influential filmmakers of the 20th century (A Clockwork Orange, 2001: A Space Odyssey)
4. Enoch Powell, controversial and enigmatic figures of British politics
5. Alfred Kinsey, sexologist, scientist, researcher, world famous for his reports on the sexual lives of American men and women
6. Patricia Highsmith, famous American writer of crime fiction, particularly the Ripley novels
7. Joy Adamson, world famous for her work with animals in Africa (Born Free a book about her life)
8. Charles Darwin, influential and revolutionary scientist
9. Bertrand Russell, one of the foremost philosopher and mathematician of the 20th century
10. Robert Walser, mostly unknown Swiss writer, but considered one of the great literary geniuses of the 20th century German literature

Romantic notion of AS: Uta Frith, who translated Asperger's work into English warns, "There is no getting round the fact that autism is a handicap. Even the best-adjusted individual with Asperger syndrome has more than the usual share of problems. It would be tragic if romantic notions of genius (such as Darwin, Newton, and Einstein) and unworldliness were to deprive bright autistic people of the understanding and help they need."

Problems and successes: Viktoria Lyons wrote, "Although the majority of individuals profiled in this book were able for high academic achievements and great successes in their chosen profession such as science or art, and some of them have made enormous contribution to society, they nevertheless had severe problems with social interactions. These social difficulties coupled with their lack of empathy very often led to additional problems including unstable relationships, divorce, loneliness, self-neglect, alcoholism, early death, misdiagnosis and long stays in psychiatric hospitals. On the other hand, our analysis has also revealed that finding the right professional niche in adulthood together with support from family, colleagues and extremely dedicated and understanding partners are the best indications for a more positive outcome."

Positive outcomes: The author also wrote, "This very brief synopsis reveals at first glance that family support appears to be the most significant factor contributing to a positive outcome (success in profession and personal happiness) whereas those who did not have support from family and colleagues had a more negative prognosis."

Spouses and partners: The author also wrote, "Unless the spouse of an autistic partner is prepared to accept the idiosyncrasies of their partner, marriages are normally short lived and end in divorce. Many relationships break up because the non-autistic partners feel that they are totally controlled or being used by the other. In addition, many spouses are unable to live with a partner who is incapable of providing emotional support. Some marry, but remain married only if their partner is patient to the point of saintliness, is able to accommodate family life to the rigidity of the autistic routines and systems, and can accept an eccentric, remote, often controlling partner."

Traits associated with AS

- pupils with ASD have great problems with mechanical learning and detest "regimented learning"
- autodidact (somebody who has acquired a great deal of knowledge despite little or no formal education)
- pessimism
- sense of absolutes-lacked ability to compromise
- eccentricity
- fearlessness and risk taking-"seem to have no sense of guilt or of danger"
- righteousness, deeply compassionate and easily outraged by injustices

- uncompromising logical approach to life
- very strong political views politically which are totally black and white without any shades of grey
- believe in saying what they think, seeing no point in sugaring the pill, just spit out everything they think with no thought of it deeply offends and upsets others
- limited use of gestures and clumsy body language
- limited and inappropriate facial expression as well as a peculiar and stiff gaze
- workaholic, with their work often their obsession (these special interests may help the person with AS to find his or her way in the world)
- enormous ability to concentrate on their work for long periods of time, high levels of motivation and perseverance even in adversarial circumstances
- brilliant memory
- extraordinary eye for details/fantastic observer-see things others do not-their ability of ordering facts into a system, superior at determining which aspects of a task are of specific relevance and which are not, extremely analytic mind
- collecting instinct
- artistic creativity- curiosity and originality of thought
- lack of empathy bordering on cruelty and maliciousness
- pursuit of own interest to the neglect of others
- strong ambitions, demanding
- problems with sexual identity, some prone to promiscuity to fill emptiness and others at the other extreme with weak sex drives
- voracious reader
- terrible sense of direction
- egocentric in the extreme, follow their own wishes, interests and spontaneous impulses, without considering restrictions imposed from outside
- lack of empathy
- some have violent outbursts-describing Joy Adamson who wrote Born Free "Joy could provoke an angel." Severe aggressive and malicious behavior are often reactions caused by "failure and frustration in the practical matters of life." Another explanation for this is impaired executive function abilities resulting in deficient inhibitory systems to control their actions.
- high level of mood and related disorders (in the author's small sample)-depression, bipolar depression

Gifts Associated with Asperger Syndrome

- above average or even superior IQ
- specific cognitive style
- more object centered than people centered
- very accurate at perceiving details, good eye for detail
- strong but narrow interests
- superior in systemizing, e.g. maths, engineering, music, mechanical understanding, computer, science
- creativity/originality-literature, music, inventions, science, linguistics
- excellent memory (good rote memory skills)
- savant abilities/giftedness
- strong focus of attention

Commonly observed social problems

- lack of skill in initiating and responding to various situations
- lack of common sense
- impairment in non-verbal communication and awareness of social standards (misinterpretation of subtle social prompts, cues, proximity to others, gestures, postures)
- range of socially and emotionally inappropriate behaviors
- empathy deficits and lack of theory of mind (the way somebody conceives of mental activity in others, including how children conceptualize mental activity in others and how they attribute intention to and predict the behavior of others)

- socio-emotional reciprocity
- rigidity and inflexibility
- speech and language abnormalities

Consequences of social impairments in children and adolescents with AS

- no social pretend play instead of constructional play
- described as bossy-trying to control other children
- bullied at school due to their unusual interests and lack of normal sociability
- lack of motivation in school-follow their own interests rather than the curriculum
- difficulty to make friends in adolescence, particular with opposite sex
- in adulthood, problems holding down jobs due to lack of people skills
- depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts
- isolation and loneliness

Theory of Mind Impairment in real life

- Difficulty in predicting others' behavior, leading to fear and avoidance of other people.
- Difficulty in reading the intentions of others and understanding the motives behind their behavior.
- Difficulty in explaining own behavior.
- Difficulty in understanding emotions-their own and those of others, leading to a lack of empathy.
- Difficulty in understanding that behavior affects how others think or feel, leading to a lack of conscience, or motivation to please.
- Difficulty taking into account what other people know or can be expected to know, leading to pedantic or incomprehensible language.
- Inability to read and react to the listener's level of interest in what is being said.
- Inability to anticipate what others might think of one's actions.
- Inability to deceive or to understand deception.
- No sharing of social interaction, leading to difficulties with turn-taking, poor topic maintenance in conversation, and inappropriate use of eye contact.
- Difficulty in understanding "pretend" and differentiating fact from fiction.

Right Hemisphere Involvement in Socio-emotional functions

- Face processing
- Automatic appraisal of facial expression
- Non-verbal affective signals such as facial expressions, emotional tone of the voice and gestures
- Visceral and somatic states and body sense
- Affectively laden autobiographical memory
- Self-recognition and self-related material
- Empathy
- Moral development
- Joint attention
- Affective language
- Emotion regulation
- Coping mechanism for stress
- Processing of affect related meaning
- Social adjustment, control of mood, drive and responsibility
- Processing of social-emotional information
- Appreciation of humor
- Comprehension of narrative
- Awareness of subjective experiences in the past, present, and future.