

IS IT POSSIBLE MY COLLEAGUE HAS ASPERGER'S SYNDROME?

This article has been revised - to read the updated version please click [here](#).

This is a question I am asked a lot. Of course, diagnoses need to be carried out by the appropriate professionals and no-one can give a diagnosis by proxy; however, I have worked in the autism field for over 18 years and in that time I have coached employees who display autistic characteristics and their colleagues to work more effectively together. The approaches outlined in this article might help you work better with someone who either has a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome or whose behaviour indicates that they might have the condition.

If you are reading this article and you feel you might have Asperger's Syndrome then you might recognize some of the characteristics in yourself and you might find the strategies helpful. You might also consider getting a diagnosis by approaching your GP. (Please note that with DSM 5, a diagnosis will be for 'Autism', a very wide spectrum which includes Asperger Syndrome)

I have found that the question, "Is it possible my colleague has Asperger's Syndrome?" is usually promptly followed by "He/She is technically really good at their job. They just don't seem to get the relationship side of the job." Or something along those lines.

Below are some possible identifiers of someone who has Asperger's Syndrome. These are only indicators and it is important to stress that an individual may exhibit some of these traits and not have Asperger's. Furthermore, each individual with Asperger's will experience different elements of these indicators and in different combinations. It is probable, however, that they will experience an element from each of the categories.

Some qualities and strengths

Like anyone, those with Asperger's can have particular strengths and qualities and it is important to look at some of the attributes which someone with Asperger's brings to the workplace. These can be as follows:

- excellent memory;
- precision and attention to detail;
- mathematical and technical skills;
- a preference for following instructions and abiding by rules;
- sticking to structured programmes;
- direct, open and honest;
- reproduction, imitation and mimicry;
- high level of vocabulary;

- dealing with projects which have a clear beginning, middle and end.

This means people with Asperger's can thrive in jobs which require precision and detail, such as accountancy, computing, engineering and architecture to name but a few. Because of the mathematical nature of music, they can also be quite musical. In addition, they can blossom in environments which provide clear structures and parameters and few unknowns.

Sensory differences

People with Asperger's can be either hyper-sensitive or hyposensitive. If they are hyper-sensitive then the senses can be more honed than usual and, therefore, sounds can seem louder, lights brighter, smells and tastes stronger; and touch keener; thus, the person can receive environmental information at a much greater intensity. If they are hypo-sensitive, they cannot process sensory input as effectively and, for example, might not feel hot water to the extent that they might get scalded. These sensory differences can mean:

- an acute sense of hearing or not being able to hear clearly;
- an ability to see in detail or inability to see the whole because of too much detail;
- a discriminatory sense of smell and taste;
- an extreme sensitivity to touch, textures and pressures or a need for stronger textures and increased pressure.

Differences in communication

People with Asperger's Syndrome can have a high level of vocabulary aided by their excellent memory skills. However, they could find contextualizing of language and abstract language difficult to understand. You might notice difficulties in:

- engaging in or understanding small talk;
- understanding body language and facial expressions;
- understanding sarcasm, jokes, irony (those with Asperger's could have a tendency to be very literal in their understanding);
- understanding verbal communication without corresponding verbal cues, for example: notes, diagrams.

Differences in social understanding

Whilst most people pick up social cues which are sometimes illogical or which are dependent upon 'seeing' the entirety of a situation and not just one aspect, people with Asperger's could have some difficulty in detecting subtle and non-verbal communications. Therefore, you might notice that they often do not:

- show empathy and understanding of others;
- keep eye contact;
- speak untruths in order not to offend; understand personal space;
- understand social rules which are not based upon logic;
- understand the complexities of inter-personal relationships.

Differences in flexibility of thought

Flexibility of thought is the ability to hazard a guess at the unknown, to cope with the unexpected, to act upon a whim. The sense of security brought on by the known can lead to the following:

- becoming obsessed with an interest, place or person;
- becoming anxious by change, spontaneity and unplanned events;
- experiencing difficulties in coping with the unknown (new people, new places, new situations);
- experiencing difficulties in remembering sequences without prompts, such as: diary, personal planner, alarm;
- experiencing difficulties in comprehending abstract concepts (e.g., formality, spontaneity, fun, anxiety);
- reluctance to use own initiative

Perception

The results of having to deal with some of the above hurdles is that people with Asperger's or someone with similar experiences can sometimes be perceived to be:

- abrupt
- absent-minded
- aggressive
- anxious
- disorganised
- eccentric
- lost in their own world
- rude
- self-centred
- thoughtless

As a consequence, some employees with Asperger's, or with similar difficulties, can experience a greater incidence of complaints and disciplinary procedures which could be a mystery to them, thus adding to their difficulties.

What can you do to support someone with Asperger's Syndrome in the

workplace?

Asperger's is a lifelong condition and although people with Asperger's might have some learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, they are often of average or above average intelligence. Asperger's Syndrome itself is not a learning disability although it can present obstacles to aspects of social and communication learning. The difficulties lie in the lack of understanding of the social nuances of communication and behaviour, dealing with unknown situations and people, problems in thinking through sequences or of consequences to actions, inability in forming overarching concepts from detailed information, inability to see things from another's perspective and dealing with sensory differences.

Asperger's affects every individual differently. Every individual with Asperger's has their own personality, their own strengths and weaknesses and they have their own difficulties to overcome just like everyone else. However, hurdles can be overcome, anxieties and resultant absenteeism can be reduced and management time can be focused more on enabling and empowering the individual rather than disciplining them.

What can be practically done to help these employees, who are quite often excellent at the technical component of their jobs?

You will have noticed that this article has been written in a more bulleted form than a prosaic one. This is to make it easier for people with Asperger's Syndrome to read, as a mass of words can sometimes be difficult to process. This is an example of a small and simple strategy that can be incorporated in every day working life to enable an employee with Asperger's to give of their best.

Some other helpful strategies are:

Aide-memoires

These help to reduce anxieties brought on by not knowing what has been planned or when events are taking place.