

BASIC OVERVIEW ON AUTISM

What really is Autism? It is a neurological disorder that adversely affects the level of social interaction and communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal) of an individual, who also shows signs of Self-stimulatory behaviour or “Stims”, characterised by the repetition of body motions. Autistic individuals can also manifest unusual sensitivity to one or more sensory inputs such as smell, taste, sound and light. Sensory offensiveness is also a warning sign of ASD which is the craving for more sensory satisfaction. Persons with Autism can also develop sharpness in a certain field of knowledge like music and math and many other distinguishable abilities.

Medical studies conclude that warning signs for ASD diagnosis can be seen as early as two years from the child’s birth but before reaching the age of three. Parents can already detect signs of Autism from the given age criteria. Termed as a spectrum disorder, Autism can manifest in different levels, namely mild, moderate, severe or a combination of these levels. A person can appear extremely bright and verbally skilled but at the same time anxious and sensory deprived. Although most people see Autism as a mental disease that worsens over the span of one’s life, this is not really the case. As a matter of fact, when an Autistic person receives intensive treatment, it is highly possible that the person can grow and mature into an adult. Currently, there is still no known exact cure for Autism, hence children diagnosed with the disorder and their families should learn to embrace both the challenges and rewards along the way.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Autism spectrum disorder is a term used to include and replace all subtypes of autism, including autistic disorder, Asperger syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder (not otherwise specified).

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published in 2013, defines autism spectrum disorder as follows:

- A. persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays
- B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities
- C. Symptoms must be present in early childhood (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities)
- D. Symptoms together limit and impair everyday functioning.

Autism spectrum disorder is a condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them.

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder vary enormously from each other but they all share the two 'core' features of autism:

- persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction. For example, they may find it hard to begin or carry on a conversation, they may not understand social rules such as how far to stand from somebody else, or they may find it difficult to make friends.
- Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. For example, they may develop an overwhelming interest in something, they may follow inflexible routines or rituals, they may make repetitive body movements, or they may be hypersensitive to certain sounds.

There is no cure for autism spectrum disorder but there are some interventions, treatments and therapies which can help solve some of the problems faced by people with autism spectrum disorder and their families.

ASPERGER SYNDROME

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism characterised by normal or above average intelligence.

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published in 2013, eliminates Asperger syndrome as a formal diagnosis by dissolving it and other subtypes of autism into one diagnosis called autism spectrum disorder.

The 10th edition of the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, published in 2010, states that Asperger syndrome is 'A disorder of uncertain nosologically validity, characterized by the same type of qualitative abnormalities of reciprocal social interaction that typify autism, together with a restricted, stereotyped, repetitive repertoire of interests and activities. It differs from autism primarily in the fact that there is no general delay or retardation in language or in cognitive development. This disorder is often associated with marked clumsiness. There is a strong tendency for the abnormalities to persist into adolescence and adult life. Psychotic episodes occasionally occur in early adult life.'

- COGNITIVE PROCESSING

HOW PEOPLE WITH ASPERGER'S OR HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM THINK

People who are not really knowledgeable with Asperger's or high-functioning Autism might not find any recognisable difference between a diagnosed person and a neurotypical individual. That's because most high-functioning autistic people appear to be normal at first glance until you engage with them in a social setting and interact with them for a longer period of time. From then on you will probably observe the person exhibit social anxiety, sensory sensitivity, and rigid routines which are among the most common features of a person with Asperger's or HFA. In the same manner, you might be surprised to know that the autistic person is also very articulate, talented, or a genius in a specific area of knowledge. With this being said, it isn't uncommon for many people to wonder how high-functioning autistic people differ with their neurotypical counterparts in terms of their cognitive processes. Thanks to the increasing number of research and studies aimed at understanding how autistic people act and think the way they do, questions of this nature are given more credible and sensible answers. These findings are hoped to shed more light on the complexity of autism as a spectrum disorder.

According to Temple Grandin, a major figure in the discussion of autism-related literature and existing issues, those who are diagnosed with Asperger's or HFA are divided into three main categories of cognitive processes. These categories include visual thinkers, pattern thinkers, and verbal thinkers.

Visual Thinkers

Ever heard of individuals with a photographic memory? If they are diagnosed with autism, they may belong to this cognitive category. For visual thinkers, everything is all about visualisation, may it be a simple thought of an object, a more abstract thing as a feeling, or a complex one as a plan. Whenever a visual thinker needs to imagine something, they have to access their memory like some sort of search engine and look for visual results. When they hear the word "honey", their mind does not simply form a plain visual representation of honey

with no background or corresponding detail. What their mind does is it recalls a related memory, like a visual scenario of a specific TV segment they've watched a long time ago that showcases how honey is made and harvested.

To conceptualise something, they have to bind together similar or related visual data that they can imagine in their mind and sort them out like files of a computer. Say for instance, their concept of peace may include the visualisation of different things, like a scenario depicting two nation leaders shaking hands, a picture of a dove with an olive branch in its beak, or the famous peace sign, As they say the words, their thoughts will follow it up with a stream of photographic data that are more associative in nature instead of linear. If the topic is about forks, the autistic person may relate it with other things linked in the visual memory, such as a pair of chopsticks that the person used months ago in a Chinese restaurant because there was no fork to be found. This leads a high-functioning autistic person to stray away from the topic and get misunderstood by other people involved in the conversation who the two objects unrelated. When creating concrete plans or structural designs, the mind of a visual thinker can be able to test run the whole system.

Pattern Thinkers

Great musical and artistic prodigies who are diagnosed with Asperger's are said to be pattern thinkers. They have the natural tendency to look for patterns in all things, whether trivial and big, in an attempt to arrive at a better understanding. Musical compositions are composed of scores that contain different elements all following specific patterns. Musical rhythm, tempo, and timbre for pattern thinkers are some sort of arrangements that they can easily decode and analyse, and their own musical compositions are a rare gem to the ears of typical people. Painters also perceive strokes and shapes in the same manner, and when they incorporate their understanding of artistic patterns in their own works of art, the quality becomes world-class. The same category of cognitive processing also applies to mathematicians who see patterns and links in numbers. Solving equations composed of long and complex algebraic expressions does not appear intimidating to them. Autistic people who are good at math see equations and

formulas as pieces of a puzzle with a definite pattern. Individuals who excel in board games and computer games are also patterned thinkers.

Verbal Thinkers

These are the more articulate type of high-functioning autistic people, who have a better natural inclination to speech and literature. While other people on the spectrum suffer from speech challenges, verbal thinkers don't have any issue with speaking. As a matter of fact, most verbal thinkers on the higher end of the spectrum can be well-versed in more than one or two languages, as they can easily understand and use foreign words if they are given the chance. Because of their adeptness in words, they can develop a hobby of memorising product ingredients, visual aids like schedules and graphs, quotes and lines from movies and personalities. Because of their extensive memory for terminologies and stuff that are associated with words, many verbal thinkers excel in statistics, history and other social sciences. They can enumerate a list of many things and different categories, or even recall important dates and events.

Autistic people also have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to their cognitive processes. For instance, verbal thinkers may not be very good with visualisation and arts, while pattern thinkers are not good with reading and writing. On the other hand, visual thinkers are weak at algebra. Knowing these facts about the categories of cognitive processes for high-functioning autistic people would help provide a better understanding to others why they excel at something and fair poorly on other things. Their behaviours can also be explained better by studying the nature and relationships of these cognitive categories.

- CDD

Childhood Disintegrative Disorder is an extremely rare form of autism. It is also known as CDD, dementia infantilis, disintegrative psychosis or Heller's syndrome.

Children with CDD appear to develop normally until the age of two. After that they go backwards, losing many of the skills they had before, such as the ability to walk or talk.

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published in 2013, eliminates childhood disintegrative disorder as a formal diagnosis by dissolving it and other subtypes of autism into one diagnosis called autism spectrum disorder.

The 10th edition of the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, published in 2010, states that 'other childhood disintegrative disorder' is

'A type of pervasive developmental disorder that is defined by a period of entirely normal development before the onset of the disorder, followed by a definite loss of previously acquired skills in several areas of development over the course of a few months. Typically, this is accompanied by a general loss of interest in the environment, by stereotyped, repetitive motor mannerisms, and by autistic-like abnormalities in social interaction and communication. In some cases, the disorder can be shown to be due to some associated encephalopathy but the diagnosis should be made on the behavioural features.'

- ESSENTIAL FACTS

ESSENTIAL FACTS ABOUT AUTISM

Below are some of the most helpful insights about Autism that you can share with your friends and family members to help spread awareness about this disability.

Myths about Autism

The lack of fundamental tests that would measure the Intelligence and many other attitudes of persons with Autism makes it difficult for normal people to understand those that are afflicted with the disorder. This obstacle of connecting with autistic individuals gave rise to many myths that put people with autism in a bad light. Some of these myths that seem to persist even today are the following:

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- Autistic people are persons incapable of loving others. This is absolutely a misunderstanding on how autistic individuals behave because they can love someone as much as a normal person would do. It's just that they find it hard to express their love on any verbal or non-verbal way because their faculties are impaired.
- Autistic people don't have emotions and can't empathise. Individuals with autism find it hard to communicate their feelings to others, but it doesn't mean they don't feel anything at all. In the same way, because interpersonal communication is one of their weakest areas, autistic persons may not easily get the feeling that people around them would want them to perceive unless it is

directly communicated and in a clear and proper way.

- Autistic people have no creativity and imagination. High functioning types of autism often result to people excelling in certain fields of knowledge who may even possess world-class talents. This discrimination against persons with this disorder is without proof and just a product of ignorance.
- Autistic people will remain autistic for the rest of their life. This isn't the case for children who have received intensive early intervention services on the diagnosis of autism. There are those who have shown great improvement, enough to live a normal life of their own.
- Persons displaying signs of autism disorder can outgrow the oddity. Conversely, one cannot just simply tell that a person will be free from autism and its symptoms over time. Depending on the diagnosis of autism a person is suffering from, and the medical treatment the person is receiving, the difficulty of dealing with the symptoms can also differ.
- Mothers lacking emotional warmth cause autism on their child. Called as the "Refrigerator Mother Theory", this claim has long been discarded by many experts. Although such lack of empathy can contribute to the worsening state of their child's condition, this isn't proof enough that such inadequacy can lead to autism.
- Cases of autism have increased at a steady rate over the past 40 years or so. In contrast, the increase in autism's prevalence worldwide has risen on a rather more drastic manner. In the last 20 years alone, the rate of increase has gone up to 600%. As a comparison, data taken from the year 1975 show that 1 in every 1,500 people has autism. But in 2014, one person in every 68 people has the same disorder which proves that the rate of increase is relatively above than steady.
- US healthcare insurance covers autism treatment. Only half of the whole 50 states require insurance to cover treatments for autism and many insurance companies don't directly include treatment of Autism Disorder Spectrum as part of their plan coverage.

Autism and its Root Cause

The real cause of Autism is still undetermined. Even today, with the advancement in Medical Research, there are only the known variables that could increase the risk of developing Autism. These factors, both genetic and environmental, are still being included in many ongoing studies in order to determine the root cause of Autism. These factors or correlations expose the greater risk of having Autism in boys than girls, as well as on a family that already has a history of Autism. It is also discovered that pregnant women who are taking certain drugs and old parents also increase the chances of having an autistic child as a result.

The Good Side of Autism

Autistic individuals have a high possibility of manifesting aptness in certain fields of knowledge as well as other positive characteristics which highlight the good side of Autism compared to the challenges that come with it. The intellectual prowess of many autistic persons range from average to high and can excel in many areas of knowledge including but not limited to arts, music, mathematics, engineering and technology.

Treatment Versus Cure

Autism as a spectrum disorder has a variety of known treatments which mostly cover therapeutic approaches rather than medical ones (which is very rarely used). These treatments include speech, developmental, occupational and behavioural therapy. The overall results of these treatments are highly positive, but these do not absolutely eradicate the disorder from a person's life. It is because these treatments are preventive in nature and the cure is still being researched by specialists up until today.

The Difficulties of Autism

One cannot simply single out a certain type of autistic handicap as easily manageable. The truth is that all forms of autism are challenging to a certain extent, and everyone is encouraged to face these challenges with affection and clear understanding of the patient's condition. The most difficult levels of autism are those that are manifested by very poor communication skills and behavioural

issues. But even autistic persons that have high cognitive abilities can also develop certain mental issues like depression and anxiety, accompanied by sensory dysfunction and behaviours that are obsessive in nature.

AUTISM AS A MEDICAL TERM AND ITS TRANSFORMATION

The term Autism was first coined in the 1930's to describe a characteristic disorder. While the term is still being used today, the perception about the disability has greatly changed over the years due to the advancement in medical research and discoveries. For instance, the development disorder known as Asperger Syndrome has been included as one of the many forms of autism in 1994.

Ever since autism was clinically termed as a type of disorder, the number of people associated with it has rapidly risen over the years. This is mostly caused by the changing medical perception about autism following a variety of medical discoveries. From the year 1994 until May of 2013, autism remained to be defined as a spectrum disorder with 5 known diagnoses, having Asperger Syndrome at the "milder" end of the spectrum, and Autistic Disorder on the "severe" end. In between these two diagnoses are a range of pervasive developmental disorders such as Fragile X Syndrome, Rett Syndrome, and PDD-NOS. After the Diagnostic Manual Version, 5 (DSM-5) has been issued in 2013, the diagnosis of autism has been changed to only one category, known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) with three functional levels known as high, moderately severe, and severe.

This change in the spectrum has resulted in people with Asperger Syndrome losing that label and be categorised appropriately with other indicators. However, since this disorder has been used so many times already, people still associate themselves as those having AS even though they are now categorised differently. This is just one of the many effects of the changes on autism's definition that need to be addressed.