



Unidentified Autism Spectrum Disorders in Adults: Could it be ASD?

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The Need

- Individuals with mild symptom expression not identified 20-30 years ago
- Many have seen multiple professionals, unsuccessfully, over the years
- Benefits of accurate diagnosis
 - ◆ Self-understanding
 - ◆ At risk for other psychiatric disorders
 - ◆ Services exist
- Caveats: Not everyone odd has ASD

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Red Flags

- Loner, solitary
 - ◆ History of always feeling different, not fitting in
 - ◆ If has friends, they may also be on the fringe
- Absent or failed intimate relationships
- Formal, precise, and/or lengthy language
 - ◆ Difficulty with small talk, conversation
 - ◆ Too much background, too many details
 - ◆ Trouble getting to the point, knowing when to stop talking
- Blunt, overly honest, or socially insensitive

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Red Flags

- Unusual prosody, rhythm, intonation
- Poor empathy for others
 - ◆ Poor insight into social relationships
- Good memory
- Intense interests and/or strong opinions, convictions
 - ◆ Pontificates at length
 - ◆ Memorizes many facts and details

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Red Flags

- Difficulty identifying/describing feelings
- Limited interest in appearance, hygiene
 - ◆ Trends, fashions, pop culture
- Likes routines, resistance to change
- History of under-employment or academic under-achievement
 - ◆ “unrecognized potential”

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Red Flags – History

- Peer issues
 - ◆ Few or no friends
 - ◆ Teased/bullied
- May read early
- Poor emotion regulation
 - ◆ May overreact, be easily provoked
 - ◆ May have “tantrums” long past age when common

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Impediments to Diagnosis

- Subclinical expression of symptoms
- Early developmental history unavailable or seemingly incompatible
- Difficulties not noticed until school years, adolescence, or later
- Average or better intelligence
- No delay in language acquisition
- May complete higher education
- May live and support self independently
- May marry and have children

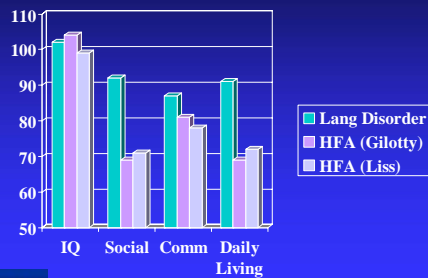
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Potential Previous Diagnoses

- ADHD
- Learning disability
- OCD, tics, or Tourette disorder
- Speech-language disorder
- Mood or anxiety disorder
- Personality disorder (schizoid, avoidant)
- Schizophrenia
- Oppositional-defiant disorder

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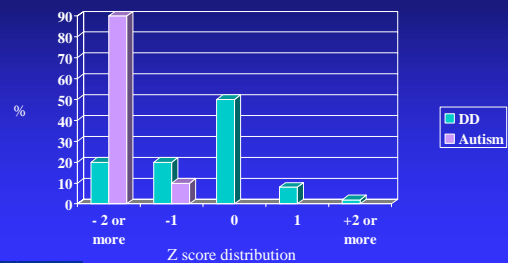
Functional Impact of HFA/AS Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales



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Gilotty et al., 2002; Liss et al., 2001

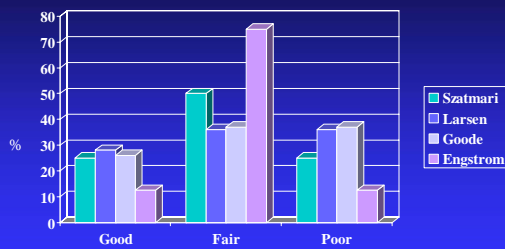
Adaptive Behavior Significantly Lower than Intelligence



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Volkmar et al., 1993

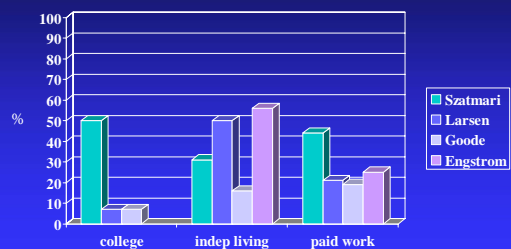
General Outcomes in HFA/AS



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Good = normal social life, well functioning without support
Fair = some support required, not economically self-sufficient
Poor = significant support needed, cannot live/work independently

Specific Outcomes in HFA/AS

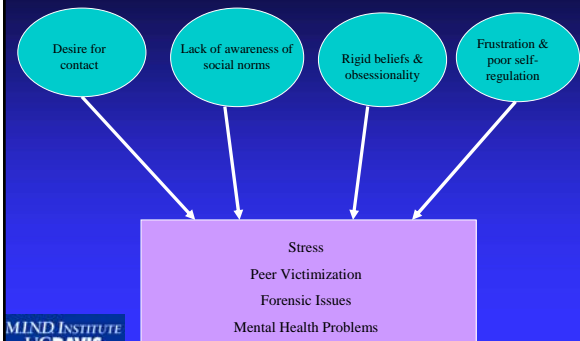


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“Asperger syndrome is often referred to as a mild form of autism. Nothing could be further from the truth. A recent follow up study (Billstedt et al., 2003) demonstrated that quality of life ratings for more able adults with autism are actually lower than for those with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities.”

Patricia Howlin, Ph.D., *Autism & Asperger Syndrome: Preparing for Adulthood* (2nd edition), 2003.

Complications



Psychiatric Issues

- Depression
 - ◆ Noted by Kanner in one of his original cases
 - ◆ Most common comorbidity in ASD (Ghaziuddin et al., 2002)
 - ◆ Present in ~30% of several case series
- Anxiety
 - ◆ Also highlighted by Kanner in several cases
 - ◆ Higher scores on anxiety scales and more anxiety symptoms than controls (Gillot et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2000; Muris et al., 1998)

Neurotypicals need to resist being blinded by the designation *higher functioning*. This is a relative term. Those of us so characterized may be higher functioning in comparison to our fellow peers with autism. In comparison to NT's, however, we struggle to survive. Thus, when people try to be kind to me and say, 'You speak so well that you can't have an autism spectrum disorder,' there is an implied judgment that the difficulties I have are under my control and hence my fault, not the result of an invisible disability. When people do this, they are clearly having their own episodes of theory of mind difficulty!

Dena Gassner, *Life on the Spectrum: The Ramification of Invisible Differences*

Improving the Lives of People with HFA/AS

- Earlier diagnosis
- Appropriate services in childhood
 - ◆ Build self-sufficiency, social, communication, coping skills
 - ◆ Interventions to minimize impact of repetitive behaviors
- Family support
- Addressing gaps in awareness & services

Interventions for Adults

- Provide relevant information on ASD in adulthood
- Support groups
 - ◆ Essential to meet others like themselves
 - ◆ Internet chat rooms (with caution)
- Educational accommodations
- Life skills coaching
- Vocational services

Interventions, continued

- Disability benefits
- Psychotherapy
 - ◆ CBT for anxiety/depression
 - ◆ Social skills
 - ◆ Marital, parenting
 - ◆ Anger management

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College and ASD

Academic Profile

Frequent Strengths

- ✓ Rote learning
- ✓ Memorizing Facts
- ✓ Spelling
- ✓ Expertise in special interest areas

Frequent Weaknesses

- ✓ Reading comprehension
- ✓ Inferential reading
- ✓ Figurative language
- ✓ Abstract reasoning
- ✓ Organizational skills
- ✓ Motor skills
- ✓ Penmanship
- ✓ Expository writing

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Issues that Make College Difficult: Life Skills

- Managing daily living without the support of family members
 - ◆ Staying on schedule
 - ◆ Keeping living space clean
 - ◆ Personal hygiene
 - ◆ Taking care of health needs
 - ◆ Finances
- Navigating an unfamiliar campus
- Noisy and confusing places (i.e. the dining hall)

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Issues that Make College Difficult: Academics

- Interpreting academic expectations and requirements
- Balancing course demands
- Time management
- Working in groups
- Sitting in noisy and crowded classrooms
- Public speaking (for some)

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Issues that Make College Difficult: Social

- Leaving a “forgiving” social support network
- Negotiating interpersonal issues around having a roommate(s)
- Ignorance of social behavior codes of male/female relations
 - ◆ Potential to be viewed as “stalking”
 - ◆ Vulnerability to rape
- Gullibility
- Potential isolation

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Educational Accommodations

- Use of a PDA to track classes and assignments
- Lecture notes or outlines provided
- Access to a laptop for note-taking and test-taking
- Reduced workload?
- Untimed tests, taken in a quiet environment
- Alternate formats for testing
- Disability Center may have classes in organization, time management, study skills
- Sometimes an aide is needed

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College as a “Sheltered Workshop” (Attwood)

- Academic achievement is a strength
- Structured social opportunities are relatively abundant
- Schedules and expectations may be more fluid than in high school
- Use college’s Disability Resource Center or equivalent
- Academia requires few social skills and tolerates/encourages eccentricity (!)
- The outside workplace is much less forgiving!!

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Employment and ASD

“Able autistic individuals can rise to eminent positions and perform with such outstanding success that one may even conclude that only such people are capable of certain achievements...their unswerving determination and penetrating intellectual powers, part of their spontaneous and original mental activity, their narrowness and single-mindedness, as manifested in their special interests, can be immensely valuable and can lead to outstanding achievements in their chosen areas.”

Hans Asperger, 1944

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Workplace Issues

- Social and interpersonal issues
 - ◆ Do not interview well
 - ◆ Relationships with coworkers
 - ◆ Few “boss-pleasing” or “impression management” skills
- Organization and time management deficits
- Inflexibility of problem solving
- Tendency to focus on details

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Career Choices

Choose jobs carefully – Play to strengths

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| ■ AVOID | ■ BETTER |
| ◆ Short order cook | ◆ Computer-related |
| ◆ Cashier | ◆ Commercial art or drafting |
| ◆ Waiter | ◆ Accounting |
| ◆ Receptionist | ◆ Library science |
| ◆ Dispatcher | ◆ Engineering |
| | ◆ Mechanic or appliance repair |

Adapted from Grandin (2004)

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Workplace Accommodations

- May be eligible for supported employment services
 - ◆ Job coaching
 - ◆ Vocational counseling
- Specific accommodations
 - ◆ Consistent workspace or work station
 - ◆ Consistent rules, work expectations, daily goals, communicated clearly (in writing best)
 - ◆ Checklist for specific job tasks
 - ◆ Minimize interruptions
 - ◆ Explicitly train particular social skills needed for job
 - ◆ http://iod.unh.edu/projects/dev_business_capacity.html

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