

Is it possible that my partner has an undiagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder such as Asperger Syndrome?

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Increasingly, adults are diagnosed for the first time with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and other Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). Many of these adults were not suspected of having an ASD and therefore were not diagnosed as children or youth because of our lack of understanding of the breadth of the autism spectrum.

Historically, we believed that individuals with ASDs generally have a little success in the some of the milestones associated with adult life such as getting a post-secondary education, having productive careers, finding a partner, or raising children. Some adults with ASDs are identified when they find themselves in the mental health, developmental services, or legal systems. Others are suspected of having an ASD in response to a crisis in their lives such as the dissolution of a marriage or experiencing problems in their employment. Often, adults come to the attention of a diagnostician following the diagnosis of a family member or child with an ASD or another neurodevelopmental disorder, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Learning Disability (LD).

Many adults come to diagnosing clinicians because their spouse or partner feels that something is concerning about the way in which they express themselves, demonstrate affection, carry out tasks, and relate to others. Problems may have increased over the months or years in a relationship, and often are most obvious when a couple has children. Although some adults with AS find parenting and the presence of children in a house rewarding and easy, others may struggle with the role of being a parent. On occasion, their troubles in intimate relationships may have been explored with marriage and family therapists who use standard marital therapy approaches; it is most often found that these approaches are

not successful. Marital therapists even suggest that one of the partners has AS. Previously, the partners seen in clinical practice were males, but women are increasingly being seen as they also struggle with undiagnosed traits. In the latter case, their overt presentation may be milder, but the impact of AS features can be equally distressing.

Below, we list some of the most common signs that a partner may have traits of an ASD:

- Has difficulty relating to you or others socially and requests the need for a lot of “alone time”
- Seems emotionally distant
- Is intensely interested in a few subjects, to the exclusion of others
- Has unusual sensory responses or preferences
- Has problems relating to their children and/or addressing their needs
- Struggles to see themselves as a part of a family unit or household
- Has problems with organization and focus, especially for tasks that are not enjoyable or of interest
- May have difficulty expressing their sexual needs in conventional ways
- May struggle with expression of emotions and knowledge of their own and other’s emotions
- Previous therapy (individual or couple) has not been successful or productive
- Struggles with symptoms of mental health or neurodevelopmental issues such as anxiety, depression, ADHD or LD

- “Lectures” to you and others instead of engaging in reciprocal conversation
- Has difficulty processing emotionally-laden communication and becomes overwhelmed

If you suspect that your partner has an ASD, it is important that you begin to discuss your suspicions with others, and with them. It is best to do this when they will be most receptive to this information, and not during a dispute or period of intense conflict. Providing them with books, reputable Internet sites, and on-line questionnaires for Asperger Syndrome will allow the individual to come to their own conclusions about whether AS is an issue for them. If you are actively engaged in couples counselling, this topic might be raised in therapy. Similarly, you or your partner’s individual therapist or clinician may provide a sounding board for your early suspicions.

When provided information in a non-confrontational and non-judgmental manner, many adults are relieved to find there is “a name” that explains their struggles in relationships and life. In these cases, it is important that contact be initiated with a professional knowledgeable about diagnosing ASDs in later life. Suitable professionals would be those who have extensive experience supporting adults with AS.

While the suggestion that they have AS may be received positively, others reject the possibility that they may have an ASD. In this case, it might be difficult for the unaffected partner to feel that progress can be made in their relationship; they may therefore need to decide on whether to stay or leave. “Separation therapy” may be helpful at these times. As well, separation and divorce mediation specialists are increasingly having contact with couples where one partner is affected by a neurodevelopmental disorder such as autism.

The following reading material may be helpful:

- Ariel, C.N. (2012). *Loving Someone with Asperger’s Syndrome: Understanding and Connecting with your Partner*. Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc.

- Aston, M.C. (2001). *The Other Half of Asperger Syndrome: A guide to an Intimate Relationship with a Partner who has Asperger Syndrome*. London: The National Autistic Society.
- Bentley, K. (2007). *Alone Together: Making an Asperger Marriage Work*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Finch, D. (2012). *The Journal of Best Practices: A Memoir of Marriage, Asperger Syndrome and One Man’s Quest to Be a Better Husband*. New York, NY: Scribner.
- Marshack, K. L. (2009). *Life with a Partner or Spouse with Asperger Syndrome: Going over the Edge? Practical Steps to Saving You and Your Relationship*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.
- Simone, R. (2009). *22 Things a Woman Must Know if She Loves a Man with Asperger’s Syndrome*. Philadelphia PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Stanford, A. (2003). *Asperger Syndrome and Long-term Relationships*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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