Managing the Emotional Rollercoaster of Asperger Syndrome

Timothy P. Kowalski, M.A., C.C.C.
Professional Communication Services, Inc.
1401-A Edgewater Dr. • Orlando, FL 32804
www.socialpragmatics.com

Emotions

happiness
surprise
fear
sadness
disgust
anger

600
Emotions are a function of the central nervous system.

- The brain has 100 billion nerve cells.

- Each nerve cell is connected to about 10,000 other nerve cells, making the potential connections about 1000 trillion.
**Limbic System**

Responsible for showing, recognizing, controlling the body's reaction to emotions.

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**Do you get scared?**

fear triggers immediate reactions.

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**Emotions & Memory are Linked**

When remembering an emotional event, you recall not only what happened, but also how you felt – an emotional memory. Both can be triggered by something you heard, saw or even smelt. Scientists think that you store early emotional memories, even if you cannot remember what actually happened. These memories may still affect you as adults.
Why do we use emotions?

fear triggers escape
happiness produces relaxation

Extreme Emotions

sadness can become depression
anger can become aggression
pleasure can become addiction
fear can lead to:
  - anxiety
  - phobia
  - panic attacks

Phineas Gage
Why do we look at people?

to see if we recognize them
judge gender and age
determine their mood

Can you identify:
happy  surprised  fearful  sad  disgusted  angry
But, do people with AS have the same ability to recognize facial expressions as NTs?

Diagnostic criteria recognize the presence of a clinically significant difficulty with understanding, expressing, and regulating emotions.

DSM

a lack of social or emotional reciprocity
Gillberg

inappropriate social and emotional behavior

Szatmari

difficulty sensing feelings of others
impossible to read emotions through facial expression of the child

Comorbidity Exists

65% of adolescents with AS have an affective or mood disorder

“For teenagers with Asperger’s syndrome, an additional mood disorder is the rule rather than the exception.” Atwood, T., (2007). The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome.
Most common comorbid disorders


obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

depression

paranoia

Increased risk for:


anger management

Comorbid anxiety

anxiety increases attempts at reducing the stress levels

AS reduces flexibility and increases tunnel vision

antisocial and noncompliant behavior often seen as controlling

but it is an attempt at avoiding stress producing situations

may increase reliance on restricted narrow range of interest
reclusive behavior often used as an avoidance technique
assures mistake will not be made since no attempt is made
may self-medicate using alcohol or marijuana
long-standing anxiety can escalate to mood congruent disorder
thinking becomes psychotic and needs psychiatric intervention

Common Anxiety Disorders

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
characterized by intrusive thoughts that the individual does not want to think about
restricted narrow range of interest often misdiagnosed as OCD
25% have true OCD


AS individuals’ thought patterns differ from NTs

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
attempt at avoiding incident or memory of such
fear of bullying
fear of harm from a bully
these thoughts are difficult to block out
school refusal
selective mutism
a severe form of anxiety
often impacts girls more than boys
anxiety increases the behaviors of:
agitation (fight)
avoidance (flight)
inability to participate (freeze)

social anxiety disorder
often a function of the fear of making a mistake
social confusion often leads to social ineffectiveness

Depression

Common in AS

may be as high as 1 in 3 children and adults
depression often a function of reactive-depression
  poor self-esteem
  mental exhaustion
  feelings of loneliness
  being tormented
  being teased
  being bullied
  pessimistic view on life
  perfectionist outlook

Anger

  rapid, intense anger often triggered by trivial events
  emotional regulation often disrupted
    on a continuum they function 1-2-9-10
  often can’t think of alternate strategies to resolve situation
    but can in another environment

property destruction often an attempt at removing unwanted feelings
  limited language of emotions
    not typical of NT peers
  aggression may function as a means of achieving solitude
    preemptive in nature
be aware of externalized-agitated depression where one blames others for faults

childhood depression and mania associated with bipolar disorder are often manifested as anger

So why is this a concern?

Challenges are a function of:

- reduced social reasoning
- empathetic difficulty
- impaired conversational skills
- atypical learning style
- sensory processing deficits
...which predispose them to:

- stress
- anxiety
- frustration
- emotional exhaustion

Why?

- Theory of Mind Deficits
- Executive Function Deficits

Theory of Mind

significant difficulty understanding the thoughts, feelings and emotions of others

why?
- prosopagnosia
- alexythymia
**Prosopagnosia**

- Can’t read the face of others
- May focus only on individual components of the face
- May not realize one expression has multiple meanings

**Alexythymia**

- The inability to identify and describe feeling states
- Can’t read emotions in others
- Limited vocabulary to describe these states
- Especially with subtle states

**Executive Functions**

- Typical characteristics associated with AS:
  - disinhibited
  - impulsive
It’s the amygdala!


in AS it may not function properly

individual can’t receive information as effectively as NT peers
continues to escalate but can’t recognize the escalation until it is too late
explosion happens “out of the blue”

Emotional Intelligence
What is EQ?

the ability to perceive, identify, and manage emotions on a personal and social level

How does AS impact EQ?

reduced ability to adapt to new situations
reduced coping skills
negative impact on job skills

AS coping strategies

social regression
fear reaction
somatic complaints (hypochondriasis)
paranoid thoughts &/or feelings
depression
clowning to hide inefficiencies
poor self image
passive aggression to elicit anger
impulsivity
Factors Limiting the Ability to Recognize Emotional States

- excessive concrete reasoning
- overuse of literal interpretation
- limited analytic skills
- limited flexibility
- limited perspective taking
- focusing on one aspect and not the whole

Reading the Many Moods of an Aspie

- Happy
- Depressed
- Irritated
- Suicidal
- Ecstatic
- Bored

EQ impacts

- personal competence
- social competence
Personal Competence

3 levels:
- self-awareness
- self-regulation
- self-motivation

self-awareness

3 sublevels:
- emotional awareness
  recognizing one’s emotions and their effects
- self-assessment
  knowing one’s strengths and limits
- self-confidence
  sureness about one’s capabilities
**AS impact on emotional awareness**

- can’t recognize and explain their emotions
- can’t associate feelings with their behavior
- can’t realize their feelings impact their performance

**AS impact on self-assessment**

- not aware of their own strengths and limits
- experiential learning is difficult
- not open to new ideas or suggestions
- can’t show a sense of humor/perspective about themselves

**AS impact on self confidence**

- limited self confidence especially in new situations
- overly opinionated
  - may reach the point of being obsessive
- often based on personal views and not grounded in sound decisions
  - Grice’s maxim of “quality”
self-regulation

4 sublevels:
  self-control
    ability to manage disruptive emotions/impulses
  trustworthiness
    honesty and integrity
  conscientiousness
    responsibility for one’s own actions
  adaptability
    flexible and open to new ideas

AS impact on self-control

can’t manage impulsive feelings
can’t manage distressing emotions
falls apart in stressful situations
increased pressure creates:
  distractibility
  irrational behavior

AS impact on trustworthiness

not prone to admit their own mistakes
reliability can be impacted by central coherence
opinionated
**AS impact on conscientiousness**

chaos often a result from:
- multiple demands
- rapid change
- shifting priorities
- rigid and not prone to adapt when necessary
- ToM impacts ability to see events in multiple perspectives

**AS impact on adaptability**

- limited ability to generate new ideas
  - Bloom’s cognitive process: “Create”
- limited flexibility impacts problem solving skills
- not open to new ideas
- can’t determine best option from a wide variety of sources

**self-motivation**

4 sublevels:
- achievement drive
  - the need to meet or exceed a given standard
- commitment
  - embracing the goals of the group
- initiative
  - the ability to act on opportunities
- optimism
  - being able to continue a goal despite setbacks
AS impact on achievement

may not have a strong desire to excel
limited risk taking
fail to learn how to improve performance

AS impact on commitment

can’t sacrifice own desires for the good of the group

AS impact on initiative

may have difficulty going beyond minimal expectations
limited ability to mobilize others
poor leadership qualities
AS impact on optimism

not good when frustrated
operate on fear of failure rather than hope of success
see setbacks as personal failure rather than opportunity for change

Social Competence

2 levels:
social-awareness
social skills

social-awareness

5 sublevels:
empathy
recognizing others feelings and perspective and taking an active interest in their concerns (Theory of Mind)
And then Mr. Spock used his mind meld...

- **service orientation**
  - anticipating, recognizing, and meeting needs of others
- **developing others**
  - recognize what others need to enhance their abilities
- **leveraging diversity**
  - embracing multiculturalism
- **political awareness**
  - recognizing a group’s emotional current and power relationships

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**AS impact on empathy**

- fail to attend to emotional cues
- 60-90% is non-semantic
- don’t listen well
- don’t express sensitivity using socially expected means
- language of emotions
**AS impact on service orientation**

- fail to recognize others needs
- may not offer assistance
- fail to recognize other’s perspective

**AS impact on developing others**

- don’t acknowledge achievements of others
- mentoring qualities overshadowed by perspective deficits

**AS impact on leveraging diversity**

- lack of tact may be perceived as bigoted
- fail to recognize and consider cultural differences of others
- may be perceived as intolerant
AS impact on political awareness

fail to read emotional currents
fail to recognize social networks
fail to recognize the factors that shape actions of others
fail to see how external events shape internal environment

social skills

8 sublevels:
influence
  being an effective persuader
communication
  able to express oneself clearly and effectively
leadership
  able to inspire and guide individuals and groups

collection
  initiate change
conflict management
  negotiate and resolve differences
building bonds
  nurturing appropriate relations
collaboration
  working with others for shared goals
team capabilities
  creating group dynamics to achieve collective goals
**AS impact on influence**

- poor use of persuasion
- fail to appeal to listener’s needs
- poor consensus builders

**AS impact on communication**

- fail to recognize and act on emotional cues when communicating
- avoid difficult situations
- poor listening skills
- fail to be open minded
  - especially to bad/unpleasant information

**AS impact on leadership**

- attempts at arousing enthusiasm may be seen as lecturing
- do not perform well in leadership positions
- often seen as dictatorial
AS impact on change catalyst

don’t like change
argue to argue not to produce improvement

AS impact on conflict management

don’t handle difficult people well
don’t initiate methods to deescalate disagreements
fail to establish open dialogue
fixate on their needs/issues

AS impact on building bonds

poor at friend making and friend keeping
may be perceived as stalking
often alienate colleagues
AS impact on collaboration and cooperation

- often hyperfocus on details and not on relationships
- not good at collaborating
- fail to identify collaborating opportunities

AS impact on team capabilities

- often not perceived as being helpful, respectful, and cooperative
- large group dynamics create excess stress

AS intervention must stress EQ

- social skill training does not make one socially savvy
- the how is not as important as the why
- simply knowing how to do something doesn't mean knowing when or where to use it
- being aware of one’s EQ is critical
So what do we do?

Better teacher training

96% of students with disabilities are included at least some of the day in general education. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (2004). 26th Annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.


Challenging Behaviors are Increasing

Students identified with behavioral issues are increasing:

- EBD
- ASD
- TBI
- OHI
staff lack effective training in prevention and management of student conflict

often don’t respond appropriately

1st minute of crisis situation is crucial for prevention of escalation or injury prevention

ineffective educational programming may exacerbate behavioral cycle

teachers in inclusive classrooms often fail to receive adequate information on how to successfully include students with disabilities

key predictor for teaching ability is teacher’s confidence to teach

those who feel more confident are more likely to meet their students’ needs
be aware that students with AS will hold it to together in school but collapse at home
he doesn’t realize he is getting stressed (alexithymia)
home is a safe environment for release

Prevention and De-escalation

Prevention & De-escalation

better staff training designed to prevent behavior problems

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

evidence based practice focusing on:
  teaching students appropriate behavior
  increasing reinforcement for appropriate student behavior
  data driven for proper design and monitoring

What Do I Do?

Know the Risk Factors

high school concerns
- 5.9% of students reported having carried a weapon (knife, gun, or club) on school property
- 7.8% reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property
- 12.4% reported having been in a fight on school property
- 22.3% of students were offered, sold, or given an illegal drug on school property
- 32% of students reported being bullied

ESE Students have Unique Set of Triggers

sensory
- noise
  - fire alarm
  - loud PA system
- cafeteria
- assembly

visual
- observing inappropriate behavior in others
touch
  hallway
  PE
  cafeteria
  assembly
change to routine
  substitute teacher
  assembly
  fire drill
  field trip

Educators’ Response

timeliness
  sooner the better to reduce escalation
appropriateness
  inappropriate strategies are often used
measure the response
  frequently knee-jerk overboard reactions are used
“Fear Factor”
  injury of self or student during altercation
  fear of being sued
  fear school won’t support actions taken

What are the needs?

incorporate teachers in identifying their needs and how best to meet them
  but “Aspie-eyes” can impact appropriate identification of the problem
    Tonka-toy playground assistant
    2nd grade principal’s lunch woes
Rumbling-Rage-Recovery


Rumbling Stage

interve without escalation by using:
- antiseptic bouncing
- proximity control
- signal interference
- support from routine
- redirecting
- home base
- acknowledge student’s difficulties
- walk without talk
- self-calming strategies

Rage Stage

- complete lack of self-control
- excessive and explosive impulsivity
- focus on protecting child, others and property
- avoid redirection
- seek assistance
- be extremely careful regarding use of restraint
Recovery Stage

typical behaviors expressed:
apologetic
amnesic
sullen
withdrawn
deny inappropriate behavior occurred
don’t force admittance
only serves to escalate behavior

allow to sleep
redirect using easy tasks
focus on relaxation techniques
do not refer to the previous rage behavior

What’s Necessary?

Collaboration:
“...improvements invariably involve the cooperation of many minds.”  Alexander Graham Bell

Competence:
“Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance.”  Confucius

Communication:
“When ideas fail, words come in very handy.”  Goethe
Which of the 6 are you experiencing right now?

Some helpful books
and yes they're all written by me!
Are you In The Zone?

Timothy P. Kowalski
Illustrated by Laura S. Kowalski

Asperger Syndrome explained

Thank you for coming.