

According to the medical world, Asperger's syndrome is a name for a neurobiological disorder, a label given to people who have trouble connecting with other people due to social cognitive impairment and so instead end up connecting with facts and objects. It is a very mild form of autism or an autism spectrum disorder. For someone who has it, it can mean an involuntary isolation.

To me having AS means that I will always be a little remote, a little bit removed from the people around me. I will frequently forget to communicate with the people around me and thus create a plethora of misunderstandings. I am as headstrong and stubborn as a rock, and I get tired very quickly from too much social interaction and I had to be trained how to interact with people among a million other little things.

My comrade Sasha has an experience not far removed from my own. Even though Sasha has NLD (Nonverbal Learning Disorder) her childhood years bear a stark resemblance to mine. In this interview excerpt she tells what effect NLD has had on her life.

¹Well, it's had a very major effect on the way I look at things and the way that I have grown up with people. The way I have interacted with people sometimes; not been so friendly because I didn't understand the way I was supposed to communicate with them and they didn't understand that I

didn't understand so I had a hard time getting to know people. So, that's kind of had a big influence on me. Ever since I realized that I had a disability I starting working with therapists on strategies to cope with that. I've been able to make more friends more easily because I've realized now what I'm doing wrong so I can fix it. Before I didn't know that I had a problem, but now I do so it's easier. It's also much easier for my family because they understand that its not my fault what I'm going through. The last sentence of this testimonial and the phrase "its not my fault" give a pretty clear picture of the type of grief she has had to put up with over the years and the seven hells of grief that people with autism spectrum learning disorders go through in general.

I am very lucky in the fact that I have rarely to never run into something that I am utterly incapable of doing. I am unlike many of my (AS/NLD) peers in that way.

Both Sasha as well as others have had difficulty in school, and my friend Tamson had enormous trouble with the math portion of the high school exit exam. She told me about it in an interview.²“I have difficulties in math especially. Basically in every year, in every class, and of course it affects me with the math CASHEE exam that I have to

take on Wednesday. For the third time yeah Ill try to pass it, but its really hard that part of the CASHEE.”

Tasks that most people take for granted are, for me, difficult and take up excessive amounts of time. I also can do things others can never dream of with the greatest of ease.

In general AS is a bunch of problematic little characteristics some of which I have, some of which I don't, all banded together and called a different point of view.

All throughout elementary school I felt like I could feel myself running into walls that weren't there, tripping over things that no one else saw.

My family had always known that there was something not quite right about me. I was tested at a young age and my mom always said to me when I was about five that I “played like a four year old and talked like a ten year old.” I was diagnosed with ADD (attention deficit disorder) in the second grade and put on adderol (a form of speed). In elementary school I noticed more things going wrong like the fact that my friendships did not last as long as everyone else's or that at recess I would often go to the library and read or play in my imagination instead of talking to other people. In fifth grade I got into a lot of trouble because I wasn't sure if people were playing or not when

they insulted me or because I would say the wrong thing. That summer I got into a big fight with my cousins and after that my mom decided to take me in for treatment. I remember my parents saying what should we do with you. I suggested taking me to a shrink. I thought I was kidding. My parents took me seriously.

I was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome in the sixth grade. I remember when it happened. I was with my shrink (I always called her my shrink because she had a way of making one feel small), Laurie Leventhall Belfer. She told me I had AS and showed me a picture book about a boy obsessed with the weather. At the time I didn't know what it was really. It took years of therapy to discern how this makes me different from all other children.

In 7th grade my mom enrolled me in Michelle Garcia Winner's (MGW's) clinic for summer camp and we never went back. I have been in therapy there for 7 years now.

The clinic is not your typical support group. We do not gather in a circle and talk about our feelings. It's more like school then like anything else.

Recently as social skills groups become more prevalent, I have heard what we learn there termed the hidden curriculum. Basically what goes on is that Michelle gives us lessons and we give her smart ass. The lessons are things

like, the four steps of communication, self-monitoring, and social thinking shiznit.

We laugh we cry we suffer. In the intervening years I have stolen her candy gone to her house and met her father.

Many girls have come and gone through our group like food through a digestive tract. Six of us have ended up sticking around and form our society of the socially dysfunctional; Kristy, Kristen, Tamson, Anna, Sasha, and myself. We all attend parties together and we all know each other, which is extremely rare for a social skills group. We have now been split up into two social skills groups but the whole remains unbroken. . Not all of us have a diagnosis of AS. Tamson and Sasha both have NLD (nonverbal learning disorder). The main difference between AS and NLD is that people who have NLD have more trouble in school than people who have AS. Most of us have the same or similar behavioral dysfunction and need the same or similar kinds of support. For the sake of convenience I interviewed Tamson and Sasha.

In all my life therapy is basically the one thing that stayed the same. It's the thing that got me my first and only job and it's the one I have been to the most parties for, though they have all been therapy parties. Slowly but surely Asperger's syndrome became a defining factor in my life. It's the

extracurricular that defines me some kids have band others have drama or choir or charity. Me, I have therapy.

Our mothers are all friends and they have formed a mommy network. (Guess what they have in common) This mommy network is where I get most of the information about the others. Our mothers go to dinners, give each other and Michelle presents and Christy's mother actually makes quilts for all the girls in the group. They gossip about all of us and my mom tells me a lot of it.

Now our group is facing a crisis. We are all over eighteen except Sasha who is 17 or 16 I'm really not sure. I am a senior this year and my parents and I have to determine whether I shall be allowed to take the ultimate test. This year, two programs that support and aid independent living are starting up here in the bay area. My mother does not think I am mature enough to survive on my own when I go to college if I go to normal college. None of the other girls who are over eighteen have moved out of their parents homes.

I always thought I would live at my parent's house and go to the local junior college and take the bus there and back. Now I am not so certain of what I am doing. I now have the option of life away from home. If I try this I

will be the first in our group to attempt to step out into the big bad world outside of therapy. Once again I will go forth and become MGW's guinea pig or maze running mouse. I do not get along that well with my mother. My mother believes that the best thing for me would be to leave my home.

Me I just want to go to a place where I can put on a crazy outfit and not be blackmailed into changing it. I want to try a life that's different from the standards and values of my mother and sister. I want to leave my home and test out the independent living facility of my choice. Sasha is going to join me at an independent living facility next year. We must all now face the ultimate challenge, breaking free and supporting our selves as individuals. We must become fully functioning members of society, with none of the handicaps we are used to having. I can only hope for the best as I am separated from everything I have ever known and hope that the skills that I have learned here will be enough to get by on for both Sasha and I when we depart for the real world. Wish us luck.