

Reaching and understanding

Elisabeth Hill, of Goldsmiths, University of London, Barbara McIntosh, of the FPLD, and David Perkins, of Prospects, underline the importance of support and guidance in helping those with Asperger syndrome to find work...

Individuals with Asperger syndrome, part of the autism spectrum, experience particular difficulties with social interaction and communication. These individuals have average (or above average) intellectual ability, a strong preference for routines, and difficulties in understanding specific aspects of language and communication, as well as other people's thoughts, beliefs and intentions. They also experience problems identifying, describing and expressing their emotions. These issues lead to further problems organising routines and adapting when unexpected outcomes arise, as well as poor interaction with others.¹ Despite high abilities in many areas, including technical ability, rote memory, or attention to detail in some cases, only around 15% of those with Asperger syndrome are in employment, despite the majority being keen to work, and capable of doing so.² A further common consequence is a high rate of mental health difficulties, particularly anxiety and depression, estimated to affect around 65% of those with Asperger syndrome.³ In the National Autistic Society's 'I Exist' campaign, a striking 67% of adults on the autism spectrum reported anxiety due to lack of adequate support at home and/or work. 33% reported experiencing serious mental health problems due to a lack of such support.⁴

In general, more than one in four European adults experience mental health problems.⁵ In 2009, stress was reported as the leading cause of long-term absence from work in non-manual workers, with each case of stress, anxiety and depression leading to an average of 30.2 working days lost.⁶ However, in recent months there has been a sharp rise in work related stress, with a 4-6% increase in stressors such as workload, conflict, job security and organisational change from spring 2009 to spring 2010, compared to an increase of 0.5-1% yearly in the previous 16 years.⁷ Even greater pressure is likely to be felt by those on the autism spectrum, particularly those with additional mental health issues, who are at greater risk from these pressures in the first place.

The project

After receiving funding from Hoare's Bank, the Foundation for People with Learning Difficulties (FPLD) and NAS Prospects conducted a small project in which four adults with Asperger syndrome were supported over a four to nine month period, out of an original cohort of nine referrals. These individuals were recruited into the project through their connections with Prospects. During the project, a mental health occupational therapy specialist employed by the FPLD and a Prospects' employment consultant jointly ran sessions with each participant individually, to identify areas of difficulty that impeded on that person's work and caused heightened levels of anxiety. These areas were then addressed, and at the end of the study period we evaluated the improvements that had been made. Case studies were outlined, with the Prospects' consultants being interviewed at this point for their perspective and feedback.⁸

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Observations

No 'one issue fits all'

The individuals in the study reported a large variety of issues, many of which were related to their mental health wellbeing and affected their work. Although these were very specific, differing widely from participant to participant, and were often not directly related to work, they affected the participants' work situation in direct and important ways. These issues included poor budgeting and time management skills as well as excessive time spent on MSN or internet dating sites.

No 'one solution fits all'

During the project a variety of methods were used to support the participant in improving in the areas identified. Given the difficulty faced by people with

Asperger syndrome in engaging with others, simply talking about how they feel about a problem is not likely to be a big success. In this project, successful strategies included using Talk Blocks for Work™, which help to increase the skills required for self-advocacy by promoting self-expression. This led to easier discussions with line managers, as well as reducing unnecessary routines and rituals, which allowed participants to engage more appropriately with colleagues, and even to arrive at work on time. Anxiety reduction techniques (eg being aware of changes in heart rate when anxious⁹), computerised interventions (eg smartphone training¹⁰) and noise-cancelling headphones may also be beneficial.

Organisational responsibilities

An organisation's policy for those with additional needs must be translated into practice, with appropriate individuals implementing reasonable adjustments and ensuring suitable support is provided.

Direct links to the brain

The thoughts and behaviours of people with Asperger syndrome can be explained by brain processes that differ from those of other people.¹¹ For example, those with an autism spectrum disorder (including Asperger syndrome) have a fundamental difficulty in understanding other people's minds, and thus their thoughts, desires and beliefs, which has a significant impact on social communication and interaction. This is often referred to as having poor theory of mind, or 'mindblindness'. While adults with Asperger syndrome have learned many of the

rules of social communication, they are likely unable to read facial expressions and body language – for example, not knowing when to end a conversation with a colleague who has passed the time of day in the lift.

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In the NAS Prospects and FPLD project, primary examples of the consequences of specific difficulties relating to Asperger syndrome include poor planning and decision making.¹² These can hinder techniques often used to help those with mental health difficulties. Planning and decision-making are highly involved in organisation and multitasking, and as such have a major impact on daily life and work stressors. All of the project participants reported difficulties arising from not being able to stop one activity to start another (eg leaving for work), feeling increased stress when something did not go to plan (eg the daily commute) and distractibility.



Stress, anxiety and depression are the leading causes of long-term absence from work in non-manual workers, and people on the autism spectrum, especially those with additional mental issues, are at greatest risk from these pressures

The law and advice available

Disability and equality laws, as well as health and safety legislation, place a duty of care on employers to make reasonable adjustments for their disabled employees. In turn, this places an onus on Human Resources (HR) and Occupational Health (OH) departments to guarantee that the appropriate supports are in place to ensure that those with a disability (including Asperger syndrome) do not face barriers to employment success. With this in mind, the purpose of the joint project was to explore how people with Asperger syndrome who experience mental health problems can best be supported in the working environment. The aim was to produce a set of guidelines and information for HR and line managers.

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In essence, it is important for those in HR to appreciate that Asperger syndrome is considered a disability under both the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA; 2004) and the Equality Act (2010). Furthermore, individuals with Asperger syndrome:

- Are at increased risk of mental health problems;
- Can be invaluable to an organisation;
- Will engage differently to others with their colleagues and managers. This needs to be considered in terms of job divisions, management choices and team working;
- Will require clear instructions and support when learning how to manage and organise their work tasks when first employed, and in response to any job changes over time, as well as in response to changes within the team;
- Will benefit from having a clear and sensitive support network in place that might include OH support, HR, line manager and team awareness of their needs, as well as – ideally – a mentor outside of their team to call

upon when needed, to talk about work and social issues that impact upon work.

As with any disability, the needs of those with Asperger syndrome are highly individual, and this relates also to those who have additional mental health difficulties, most commonly anxiety. However, with targeted, specific support and understanding of a person’s difficulties and potential, employees can be assisted in such a way as to reduce – and ideally eliminate – detrimental effects on either their mental health or work productivity. This can be achieved through a range of techniques and with the assistance of a variety of organisations.

To download an HR factsheet on ASD, Employment & Mental Health, visit: www.gold.ac.uk/media/ASD%20employment%20mental%20health.pdf

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