

Conversations about Asperger syndrome (or AS) usually go something like this. One party is familiar with it, and one is not. The latter asks what is Asperger syndrome? The former, if he or she be honest, invariably (and regrettably) answers with what amounts to a platitude, something along the lines of 'It depends on who you ask', 'It varies from person to person' or 'You could get a million different answers and each and every one of them would be right'. Because I don't want you all to think that you've wasted your valuable timing coming all the way here on a cold night, I'll give you my best definition: it is behaviour which is characterised by long-term consistent problems relating to dealing with other people on a day-to-day basis, in reading body language and detecting nonverbal cues – a kind of autism really.

That, I hope, will be the last statement I make this evening that sounds even slightly academic. For the next 20 minutes, I intend to be completely personal and specific. So what is my personal experience with Asperger syndrome? To be quite honest, it would have to be the fact that at any given time, I'm just happy to live in my own little world. When I was a child, a toy to be played with, a cartoon to be watched or a book to be read was infinitely more appealing than going outside in the fresh air for hide-and-seek or a game of soccer. Added to that, I was a little bit on the bashful side with other children. My parents noticed this early on; my two brothers (who are both older than myself) gave them plenty of practice in copping on to the small things.

From time to time, a lady would call to the house with a view to speaking to me on a one-to-one basis. As I was too young at the time to understand, nobody ever told me exactly who this kindly woman was, but that I had to go along with it. She would show me pictures, ask me specific questions (about what I don't quite remember). In short, either the people around me knew that I was somewhere on the autistic spectrum, more on the wings than on the centre, but certainly playing on the right field. This tendency to fantasize, to drift off, definitely had an impact on my school work as well. How could I ever think that it wouldn't? My problem in school, even in subjects in which I could hold my own and/or enjoyed, was that I always wanted to be somewhere else. Consequently, unlike a lot of AS people, I did not excel academically during my primary or secondary years.

Having said that, I had a reasonably good relationship with my teachers because of my behaviour. A lot of my classmates, even bright and hardworking ones, were quite troublesome; they'd give lip to authorities because they thought it would give them street cred with their buddies and make them look tough. Maybe it was AS that persuaded me to take the exact opposite approach from early on, but on the other hand, maybe it was my ever-keen instincts for self-preservation. Don't get me wrong, I did make some friends there, that's unavoidable; but completely fitting in was just not on the cards. As you might expect, bullying was an issue - more so in secondary than primary – but I suppose it's worse at that stage for everyone, AS or not, because teenage years are rough for everyone. That was another platitude for you.

So how did people encourage someone like me to deal with bullying? Looking back on things as they were, you could probably divide those suggestions into two categories – active and passive. Before we go on, yes I am perfectly aware that I am breaking my promise about not being scientific. Starting with active; fighting back, literally. If someone gives you grief, hit them in the nose or something along those lines. Having been put under the impression that that kind of strength automatically earns people's respect, I tried that a few times. It gave people a few shocks, but my heart was never in it. When 'active' failed, I resorted to 'passive'. Some people define 'passive' as ignoring the source of the troubles, or laughing it off. For me, it was simply crawling into my shell. My saving grace was the knowledge that at 3.20 pm, the bell would ring and I would be home and dry, back to the TV, my music and my books. Incidentally, it was during 5th year that I was formally diagnosed with Asperger syndrome.

In keeping with many AS people, I gave sport the cold shoulder as far as extra-curricular activities go. Rugby was mandatory in my school at primary level, but when I hit secondary, I stopped kidding myself and obeyed the final whistle so to speak. One thing I did have a whack off of for a while was debating. In all fairness I enjoyed it; it's a great meeting point for students who don't go in for sports that much. Looking back on things, I could probably have been good at it as well, if I'd applied myself more. Prepping and organizing for speeches were never really my forte. There are two ways, however, in which debating did change my life; number one is that public speaking, no matter how sloppily or how well it's done, really helps to build confidence for anyone wary of performing in front of crowds.

You might say that without it, I wouldn't be here tonight. The other way in which debating made its mark on me is that it gave me a proper introduction to the fairer sex. Not something most people associate with that kind of activity, but then again life with AS is not predictable. The school I went to is an all-boys one. Debating was an ideal way of establishing contact with other schools, and by extension, female students. You don't get quite the same opportunity during a rugby scrum. Many AS people have difficulties with romantic relationships, and I am no exception. During my school years, my tendency to focus a great deal on my own interests and hobbies accentuated these problems to the nth degree because when pursuing a relationship one must show an interest in what the other party likes as well. Some might say that's why things didn't work out, but you know, I couldn't possibly comment. As a direct consequence, my interest in debating lessened by the time I hit my Leaving Cert year.

That kind of self-absorption on my part also affected my ability to maintain friendships in school. It was also a factor in the bullying I mentioned earlier. Some suggested that by displaying some interest in what other people were up to and by involving myself more that I would stop drawing the wrong kind of attention to myself. For me this didn't work, and I wouldn't automatically recommend it to other AS people. Perhaps others will have a different story to tell. University was a real improvement for me. People's idiosyncracies and eccentricities are, by and large, accepted and even encouraged. One of the reasons is that it's easy to get lost in a larger, more diverse group of people. That's not to say that I didn't run into the occasional obstacle; for instance, I'm a habitual non-drinker. Never met a drop of alcohol I enjoyed the taste of, and for philosophical and cultural reasons, I object to the hold the drinking culture seems to have over this particular country.

Unfortunately, some people did not take kindly to my stance, and kept insisting that I change my peculiar ways until one day, I had it out with their ringleader in front of the entire class minutes before one of our lecturers came in. Having not been firm enough against torment during my school years, I managed to apply some lessons whilst in college. On a less belligerent note, I also took up amateur dramatics during this time. If anything, it's even better than public speaking for the purpose of building confidence. You might say that my love of fantasizing and daydreaming, which had never gone away, was finally harnessed, and in a very effective and positive manner. Four years in college, and four plays to show for it. One of them was in Irish and I even got a very handsome trophy for that role.

The Irish language had been a particularly strong interest of mine for a number of years, and although I didn't take any modules in it at the time, I was involved in student societies related to it, as well as in the afore-mentioned play. Along with some people who would become lifelong friends, I made several trips to the Kerry Gaeltacht as well. One of the best things for people with AS can do is combine one of their interests with a fairly large social circle. So I did that, and without realizing it, I set in motion events which essentially made me what I am today. My degree was in Government & Public Policy and it lasted for 4 years. I had the conferring in autumn of 2008, but didn't get anything like a steady job until roughly a year later.

After that lengthy wait, I found a position as a féitheoir, or supervisor, in Coláiste an Phiarsaigh, an all-Irish boarding school in Glanmire not far from where I live. Our job was to get the kids up in the morning, watch over them at mealtimes, organize supervised study for them, take them on trips to the shop, make sure they don't get out of hand during after-school sports and stop them going wild in the dormitories at night. It was certainly a highly-interesting experience for me to view things from another perspective. Then, as now, I had very clear memories of my own school experiences and I was on the lookout for students who may have had AS traits sometimes with a view to helping them, but also out of genuine detached curiosity about how others fared under similar situations to myself. This was quite difficult, because I also had to balance that with doing my job. Our first duty was to keep the school running smoothly, and in order to do so, one needs to keep a psychological distance from the pupils.

What did catch my attention there was the presence of a special needs section in the primary school. I took this as a good sign because it's an example of a support system for people with AS or similar frames of mind (that's the term I'd prefer using – 'condition' implies something wrong which is rarely the case). To compare with where I was, there was no such mechanism in place at either primary or secondary level. Maybe we're witnessing a change in attitudes toward Asperger syndrome. One area I've been neglecting up to now is that of how AS can influence how one works and thinks. It can lead to hyperconcentration, the act of focusing on something (at times apparently insignificant) in a very intense manner. Something like this can prove very useful when you're studying, working or even, God forbid, writing a speech. Many of the activities I've undertaken over the past few years have involved a great deal of text and analysis. Hyperconcentration is perfect for this. For instance, from 2010 to just last year, I studied for a Postgraduate Diploma in Irish Translation and Editing.

Believe me, it was quite a challenging course. Now, you're probably all thinking: “Hang on a minute - if he's a fluent Irish speaker, why would he find translating difficult?” Let me put it this way; speaking a language is like driving a car, but translating from one to another is like being a mechanic. An entirely different kettle of fish. That requires a lot of focus – breaking a sentence down into its smallest composite parts, trying to ascertain what is the exact meaning of each piece, not as easy as you might think especially in the case of Irish where the location of just one letter can affect the meaning of an entire phrase. This has also been a factor in the work I did for the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin where I lived for six months last year. The project we were engaged in entailed transcribing unpublished collections of Irish dialect terms into a computer database.

Concentrating on work was not the only challenge I faced in Dublin, however. It was also very special for another reason in that it was the first time I ever lived away from home. Because AS people often have social difficulties, they often find the process of organizing their day-to-day affairs frustrating, or absorption in their hobbies and interests may cause them to lose track of important matters. Since that kind of thing has been known to happen to me from time to time, and I was terrified that this kind of thing would happen to me often with no one looking out for me. However, paying the rent, putting out the washing, making sure there was enough milk – these things I found I could handle. Not having company was fine by me because I am generally quite solitary at heart.

So far, that was the greatest challenge I have faced in my life. The fact that I not only got through it, but even enjoyed myself in the process, is indication that anything is possible, as if we all didn't know that already. A few years ago, I joined a support group to do with Asperger syndrome called Outreach, where each of us has a support worker, but mostly we just get together for social purposes. What would really be nice, though, is if this speech could be a portent of things to come, that I could play a role in explaining life with AS to those not in the know, or on the other hand, acting in an informal, advisory role for those who think they may have it and might like someone to

talk to. There is no such thing as an easy life for anyone, definitely not during school years; but I like to think that if I can get through it, anyone can. Thank you all very much.

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