Autism, Asperger’s, & Aspirations

A seminar by John Fode
Disclaimer:

- I will refer to television shows, movies, pop culture FOR EXAMPLES ONLY for understandable reference points for further understanding of Asperger's.

- I will NOT be trying to sell anything, nor do claim ownership over any referenced items.

- My views and opinions are based on my own experience with Asperger’s.
Introduction of Topic & Opening Experiment

- Talking about Asperger’s (a form of autism)
- What is autism and/or Asperger’s
Deeper look; fighting stereotypes

- What’s my credibility?
- I’m an expert on Asperger’s
- Years of knowledge and expertise
Breaking the silence

- I have Asperger’s syndrome/ASD
Discussing my experience

- Give you a first-person perspective
- Walk you through my life
- Who better to discuss life with Asperger's?
- Live it, know it, share it
- Request: don’t just view me as “the Asperger’s guy”, please view me as an individual
Table of contents

- What is Asperger’s syndrome
- My challenges in day-to-day life
- Overcoming challenges
- Benefits of Asperger’s
- Myths
- Portrayal in media
- Famous people with Asperger's

- Question and Answer session
What is Asperger's syndrome

- Named after Hans Asperger
- Mild form of autism
- Many traits of autism – hybrid experience
- Intelligence on the spectrum is not impaired – myth/misunderstanding.
- Certain parts of brain larger (will get to that later)

Will talk about traits
The brain that’s always on

- Simply put; my brain is different.
- Normal neurotypicals can turn their mind off
- Brain is on 100% of time
- Impossible to clear my mind; or switch it off

- Causes sleep issues.
- Need to clear mine for fast sleep.
- Medication
The ‘battery’ bunny brain
(it keeps going, and going, and going)

- Make a conscious decision on what to think about.
- Otherwise, my brain will go to dark places.
- So I consistently keep my brain busy
- I control it, so it doesn’t control me.
The ‘Battery’ Bunny brain (continued)

- The benefits of this:
  - Process information longer
  - Analyzed knowledge faster
  - Research more thoroughly
  - Increase my creativity
Social Interactions And Asperger’s

- difficulty understanding social interactions and customs.
- Sarcasm/Taking things literally
- Facial expressions
- Tone of voice and misinterpretations
Sarcasm/taking things literally

- Elementary school – no understanding
- If a statement was said, I took this truth
- Took jokes and exaggerations as facts
- caused trouble with reading people
- Created confusion
- Learn the wrong information
Understanding Sarcasm

- High school – started to understand existence
- College – got a good handle on detecting
- Have greater understanding – 90%
- Look for specific traits
- Work in progress
facial expressions and reading people

- Neurotypicals born with instinct
- Had to learn over time
- Simply wasn’t able to understand or decipher
  - Happy, sad, mad, confused etc.
- Eventually able to understand more
- Have to ask people
- Body language
- Trained myself – 95%
Tone and volume of voice

- Difficulty with tone and volume of voice
- If a voice is louder = brain thinks “angry”
- If a tone is more stern = angry.
- It’s an instant gut reaction, and has led to many misunderstandings.
- Difficulty with this to this day.
Change – a common trait

- Difficulty adapting to change
  - More so than neurotypicals
  - I follow a strict routine – comfort

- If routine is changed; high anxiety

- Moved furniture
- Sudden change
- Transition
- All of these changes will create anxiety
- The bigger/more sudden the change – worse anxiety
Scientific explanation for change

- Memory and emotion parts of brain are larger

![Brain Diagram with highlighted hypothalamus](image)
Mind is constantly recording information around me – environment, room, color, etc.

This is recorded as normal

All my senses are attached to this normal setting

If things are changed; this conflicts with mind
  - Emotional and memory senses

Just how brain works; but trying to build tolerance
  - After years of training/exposure – more flexible
The most difficult thing to work with

- Acute anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Clinical depression

Many people with Asperger’s deal with these
  - very common
Acute Anxiety

- Dealt with this for years – imagine what it’s like?
- Nearly everything can be a trigger (I have dozens)
- A sentence, image, news, event, word, change, health
  - Can happen every day – sometimes many days in a row
  - Makes functioning in life very difficult
- Two examples (of many)
  - water bottles – cancer
  - the world will end
Clinical depression

- very common

- Like anxiety there are triggers – more emotional

- Can slip into deep depression
  - makes functioning difficult

- Can see things in negative light; sad; lack of energy, near impossible to function

- Can last for many days at a time

- gotten very low

  Lets lighten up mood
“Hey, that’s the wrong mouse”
coping

Working to get under control
  ◦ ongoing battle; But winning

Developed coping techniques
  ◦ I distract myself by doing something I enjoy
    • Cat picture
  ◦ Exercise
    • “Walk talks”
    • School setting – walk in hallways
  ◦ Routine
  ◦ If coping tool/routine becomes “tainted”, I get rid of it
  ◦ Therapy
  ◦ “Mental Shield”
  ◦ Stay away from the news! Very charged information.
  ◦ Medication
A profound accidental discovery

- Tried gluten-free food
- Depression started to feel better
- Then was less anxious
- Started strict gluten-free diet: feel better
- Doesn’t fully get rid of anxiety and depression
- more manageable
- small amounts can knock me down
In April 2014, I had surgery... very scary

First couple of weeks after; very depressed

But overall, My anxiety/depression improved

I lived through one of the scariest things ever, and am stronger because of it.

More flexible

Saw life in a new light.

Still there are ups and downs
On to the benefits and balances

- Memory
- Super concentration
- Hyper focus
- Perseveration/extra determination
- Creativity
- And others
Extremely good memory (the good)

- Powerful asset and gift

- Absorb high amounts of information
  - School setting (writing)

- Conduct extensive research/remember

- Rarely forget anything (even small things)

- Long-term memory very powerful
  - Photographic memory (plays like video; in motion)

- Double-edged sword
Extremely good memory (the bad)

- absorb too much information/emotionally charged: “Brain Overload Meltdown”
  - Emergency shutdown

- Get “mentally stuck”

- Pushing will make it worse

- Need time to “unclog” my brain
  - being productive

- Emotionally charged information – (hits me harder)

- Writing this speech brought back “charged” memories
Obsessive focus/super concentration

- Common trait – obsessive interest
- Neurotypical’s interest level is like a flashlight
- Asperger’s interest level is like a laser beam
  - Narrow but intense
Obsessive focus

- Obsessive interest on topics/ideas/objects
- Digging into interest, enthusiastic/feel my best
- Anxiety/depression disappear.
- Can dig extremely deep/see in new light
- One of my obsessive focuses is movies
Common misconception

- Stays the same forever? No. Can change suddenly

- Lifelong love for certain topics;

- But focus shifts; switch from interest-to-interest

- Most of the time it shifts to sub-topics in film
  - But will shift outside

- So one day I could be focused on:
Godzilla movies
Black holes and astrology
The origin of root beer
Obsessive Focus does shift

- My focus shifts
- start a project – Become a new obsessive focus
- Great for self-motivation
Mental Bridges

- When thinking of something, mind can switch and link to related topics.
- Will do so infinitely, –a million miles away from the original topic.
Mental bridge example

- Mental bridge experiment
- Starting point: the 1932 movie “the mummy”
Example conclusion

- To continue to go on infinitely
- I started with a single idea
- Went from The Mummy to haircut
- One downside: distraction
  - Can go deep into mental bridging
  - oblivious to surroundings
  - miss information
Back to the laser analogy
  ◦ Hone into a single idea
  ◦ Doesn’t have to be an interest

Entire mind will focus like a pinprick;
  ◦ Intense, deep, and super concentrated

Can look at things differently; discoveries
  ◦ Because I can look deeper into things
Hyper focus (the bad)

- Focus on something stressful or unsettling
  - Hone; emotional state deteriorate – meltdown

- Emotionally Charged Information

- Can trick my own mind – make things real
  - Example: finger; power of mind

- Still a problem; work in progress

- Sour candy helps by shifting focus
  focus on new sensation
Perseveration (the good)

- Similar to hyper focus
- Fixate on something; problem solving
- Instinctual urge to find solution; no matter what
- Not more patience; but something I **NEED** to do
- Analogy: train tracks
Staying on one track; only small openings for switching
Extra determination/motivation; problem solving
Perseveration (the bad)

- If the problem is unsolvable (out of control):
  - Frustrated
  - Mentally stuck in "loop"
    - This is what it’s like
  - If stuck too long
    - Short-circuit; meltdown
  - Training to shift track
  - Sour candy can help to shift tracks
Other very positive benefits

- Very creative; imaginative
- Fast learner; desire to learn
- Delve into extensive research
- Extra determination
- Look at things differently
- Innovative
- Good memory
- Care for others
- Heightened sense of hearing
- Excessive focus: learn a lot in little time
myths of Asperger’s

- Most common myth: no empathy

- Not true; very empathetic – Caring

- more empathetic
  - Show in different way

- Hit hard by news stories
  - Disasters, animal cruelty, etc.

- meltdown

- no empathy: It’s a myth. it’s a lie.
Sandy Hook – empathy myth

- Asperger’s had no bearing on this
- Adam had other issues unrelated
- People with Asperger’s – empathetic
  - wouldn’t be driven to do this
    - If Asperger’s the only factor
- Please don’t stereotype us
Myth two: no interest in other people

- Out right lie.

- Very interested
  - Don’t know what to say (say nothing)

- Misinterpretation (both ways)

- Enjoy to socialize
  - Sometimes experience social anxiety
Other **myths and outright lies**

- Don’t experience emotion
- are violent and dangerous
- Have low IQs/unintelligent
- Don’t want friends
- Low achievers
- Never makes eye contact
- Can not learn social skills
- Lacks creativity
- Will outgrow it
- Have no souls (?!?)
- Is contagious!!... *over the television /radio* (?!?)

**Lies, lies, and more lies.**

These are the kinds of myths/lies/stigmas that make me scared/ashamed to tell people I have Asperger's!
Asperger’s and the media

- The Big Bang theory (TV)
Dr. Sheldon Cooper

- Has many traits
- Some exaggerated, some accurate
- Difficulty with sarcasm
- Brutally honest (offending some people)
- Focused/obsessed – benefit
  - Absorb high amounts of information
Dr. Sheldon Cooper (continued)

- Empathetic – differently
- Routine/rituals (ex: door)
- Change – vocal
  - couch
- And more
- Exaggerated for comedy
  - Not offended
A famous character

- One character – spot on
- Not exaggerated
- Everyone should know his name
- Existed for 126 years
- Books, television, movies
- Have any guesses
Sherlock Holmes

Asperger’s syndrome
His traits of Asperger’s

- Absorbed in cases – hyper focus/obsessive
- Brutally honest – social understanding
- Mind always on; sleep problems
  - violin
  - 100%
- Change environment
- Difficulty with change
His traits of Asperger’s (continued)

- Amazing memory – cases

- Perseveration – keeps going and going
  - Instinctual need to solve problems

- Involved experiments
  - Flies and jar

- Coping techniques

- Self medication – 126 years ago
  Proper medication today
His traits of Asperger’s (continued)

- Much, much more

- Shown in all media – Books, TV, Films
  - Basil Rathbone – Robert Downey Jr.

- Inspiring and empowering

- Positive light

- Motivation; Self-esteem – be the best I can

- Personal hero

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle?
Real people with Asperger’s traits

- Hans Asperger
- Elbert Einstein
- Thomas Edison
- Bill Gates
- Mozart
- Thomas Jefferson
- Abraham Lincoln
- George Washington
- Benjamin Franklin
- Steven Spielberg
- H.P. Lovecraft
- Dan Aykroyd
- Henry Ford
- Robin Williams
- Daryl Hannah
- Alfred Hitchcock
- Frederick Nietzsche
- Keanu Reeves

People with Asperger’s have gone on to do great things
Asperger’s is a gift
Managing my challenges
Different – not less
I am me
I have Asperger’s
Thank you!

- Next up: Question & Answer Session