

The Spectrum Of Autism, Anxiety, Parental Distress & Mental Health

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Autism and parental distress

- We will briefly explore:
- Why stress is high in families with Autism Spectrum (AS)
- How AS & cognitive challenges impact upon an individual: Single attention, associated cognition and autism (SAACA)
- Relationship to neuro-typical (NT) information processing
- What this means with regard to stress and anxiety for parents of children with AS
- How to help: The system, the government the family.....

Why Anxiety and Stress?

- AS population prevalence anxiety disorders 20-40%
- Non AS population 3-13%
- However, stress for parents of children with AS higher than for any other disability (Sharpley, Bitsika & Effremidas, 1997)
- What are the factors that are impacting upon stress for AS individuals & upon parents/carers?

Contributors to family stress

- Diffability (autism spectrum)
- Lack of support (family, friends, education, community)
- Parental conflict (couple and family conflict)
- Personality styles (not always conducive to need for structure etc)
- Anxious/nervous, controlling, over protective.

Differing design for different jobs

- NT design fits with the need to divide attention and accommodate multiple interests in the chaotic world we all live in.
- AS design fits with focused attention, single interest (great in the creative world of arts, & vocations needing focus i.e. car industry; leggo; sport, engineering; animals; drawing etc.)

Single attention & cognition in AS

- Single attention (main flow of attention)
- Literality (even with abstract interests)
- Thinking in closed concepts
- Lack of generalisability
- Timing and sequencing difficulties
- Forward thinking tends to occur when connected with interest only.

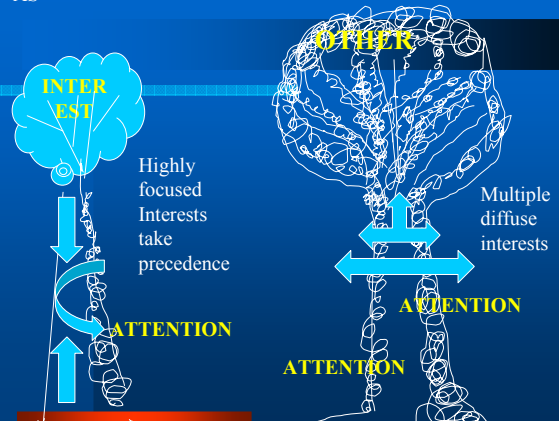
FOR MORE INFO...

Murray, 1992 etc (Durham Papers) Wendy's books: Build Your Own Life; Understanding and working with the spectrum of autism. The passionate mind: How people with autism learn

NT divided attention and cognition

- divided attention
- Non-literality (reads non-literal signs)
- Thinking in open concepts
- Generalisability
- Understanding timing and sequencing (appropriate social timing)
- Can forward think outside of one's interest: accommodation of 'Other'

AS



NT attention:
Inwards
focused but
looking out

presentation
of self takes
precedence:
Mental health
and autonomy
connected.

How do others see
me?
How do I look?
Do they approve?

What do
others
think
of me?
What do
They think
Of my
family?

NT & AS source of conflict

- Presentation of self
 - Considers impact of self upon other
 - Need to look good
 - Need to accommodate the interests of other's (whilst taking care of self)
 - Has access to global map showing intention, context and scale of everyday concepts
 - Autonomy based upon 'OTHER' s approval & acceptance.
 - AS Diff-ability: threat to being accepted

AS: presentation of interest

- Not interested in presentation of self
- No accommodation of other
- No spare attention
 - This leads to difficulties appreciating the concepts that rule the world of NT's
 - Increases parental distress
 - Each is left in an alien world that doesn't understand the other.
 - Autonomy questioned?

Factors influencing stress for parents of individuals with AS:

- Genetic factors (family history of anxiety or other mood disorders)
- Disposition: temperament, personality (shy, anxious)
- Relationship factors – parenting styles & modeling of caution/anxious behaviours
- Cognitive factors- information processing styles and negative self-talk

Other crucial variables

- Professional ignorance
 - Non-understanding of AS
 - Non-understanding of family needs
- Little recognition of resources needed by families
- Low public understanding of AS
- Poor mental health due to lack of support & autonomy

These lead to:

- Lack of support (familial, educational and professional)
- Acute parental anxiety feedback loop
- AS promoted as a disease or as a disorder that is worse than cancer!
- Cure autism now agenda
- What message are we giving?
- What message should we give?

Internal & external pressure leading to parental distress

- Lots of pressure to parent well
 - I have to do a good job with this child/adult
 - This person's behaviour is my responsibility
- When one is focused upon outward appearances (what others think of your parenting) having a person with AS is doubly demanding

Autism and Gender

- Being female will also impact upon AS presentation
- Males & females present differently
- Aspergirl:
<http://www.help4aspergers.com/>
- Mental health issues will also be different accordingly!

A Poem

Autism: My Gender

My gender and I are a package.
We come as part of the deal.
“But autism shows far more damage”.
“Look at the things that you feel”.

Autism: My Gender

I cannot account for these feelings.
Emotions intense and extreme.
But my issues with everyday dealings,
Can cause me to rant, shout and
scream.

Autism: My Gender

I don't desire the 'make-up'.
Fashion and high-heels don't appeal.
I don't like perfume or my hair cut,
But my need for 'understanding', is
real.

Autism: My Gender

The expectations placed upon me,
Being female and all,
Push me further into pain and grief,
With my back against the wall.

Autism: My Gender

"I cannot multi-task", I say.
"But you must, You're a woman. You
can".
"You must cook, clean, organise and
play
The role that supports your man."

Autism: My Gender

Your children and men depend on you,
You must be strong, in control and
sure.
"What if these things I cannot do?"
"What if my timing is poor?"

Autism: My Gender

"You must work harder, try harder to
be,
What society says and dictates".
"But both my autism and gender are
me, you see."
"They both influence my states".

Autism: My Gender

As a woman I function differently.
As a woman I think, see and feel.
As a woman I value all that is me.
My autism is part of the deal.

How can we help?

- Address the real issue by:
- Listening to parents
 - Understand SAACA
 - Teach the professionals
 - Give hope not gloom
 - Increase education & resources
 - From GP's, teachers, mental health professionals etc. to family & individuals.

Resources

- Lobby MP's and share personal story
- Form support groups
- Wendy's page & resources
- www.wendylawson.com
- Free Educational Resources:
<http://www.autismtraining.com.au>
- The local AS support group (Autism Victoria)
- Autism aware professionals
- Extended family and friends
- **Each other**