

Asperger Syndrome *and* Long-Term Relationships



Ashley Stanford

Foreword by Liane Holliday Willey



Asperger Syndrome and Long-Term Relationships

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To my family

*You are my breath of fresh air
When life becomes stale.*

*You are the twinkle in my eye
When I smile.*

*You are my straight path
When my world stretches out in all directions.*

*You are my past, my present, and my eternity.
I relish every day with you.*

*I write of him
who fights
and vanquishes his sins,
who struggles on
through weary years
against himself...
and wins.*

*Caroline Begelow LeRow,
Pieces for Every Occasion*

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Foreword

When I speak to an audience interested in hearing about Asperger Syndrome (AS), I underscore that a support system is crucial to a happy way of life for everyone involved. I do not think this is an insult to my AS community. I believe most human entities flourish best under the glow of friendly empathetic support. The goal, we with AS might need, is just of a different hue and wattage. We need altered kinds of support and most typically, longer support, than the normal population might need. Parents of children with AS often ask me who would be the most likely to provide such support.

They wonder, “Will it be me? A supervisor at a group home? A trusted friend? Who?”

Of course, I cannot provide one distinct answer to that question. However, I can help those who need to know how to explore possible scenarios that might unfold for their child with AS. Only one of my responses is characteristically met with astonishment and disbelief, even though that very response is the mainstay of my daily existence. The answer that confuses so many, but comforts the soul most sweetly is simple – a spouse or significant other.

They ask, “What? Marriage? My child in any kind of interpersonal relationship? You must be kidding me. People with AS never form those sorts of bonds. Right?” Wrong. I would never joke of such a thing. The truth is, no one knows how many adults engaged in an interpersonal relationship have AS in their mix of souls. In fact, we may never know. There are simply too many obstacles currently blocking the way between adults with AS and an official diagnosis from a qualified professional.

I myself have thought about writing a book on AS and interpersonal relationships for quite some time, because I am the AS half of a successful Asperger Syndrome/Neurotypical marriage and because I enjoy writing

about AS. But the task soon proved to be particularly daunting to me. I am not at all sure why. I am just sure it is something I am ill prepared to write about. Thankfully, Ashley Stanford came to the task more than prepared to logically, empathetically, and whole-heartedly answer not only all the questions I thought I had on the subject, but even far more than I had ever imagined were possible.

When Ashley asked me to provide the foreword for her book, *Asperger Syndrome and Long-Term Relationships*, I was a bit nervous. I was very worried Ashley might have written things that would upset me. As my AS father is wont to say, neurotypicals have a better press agent than Aspies. In other words, I worried I might read a dozen or a hundred things that would upset my heart. I hear, all too often, the complaints and confusions of the partners without AS, the partners who want so badly to understand the whys behind their AS spouse's ways.

I do not mind telling you that I had nothing to worry about. While I methodically made my way through Ashley's book, I kept comparing myself to that of a child happily digging through a big community sand box that held trinket after trinket of lovelies. With every turn of the page, Ashley's book just kept pouring out the trinkets. More and more and more goodies just kept surfacing.

I cannot possibly make a list of all the things Ashley's book covers. There are too many! Good idea, after well-researched concept, followed by illustrative example and elaborated suggestions – pile one on top of the other until a tower strong and solid enough to withstand all sorts of interpersonal uproar – stands smack dab in front of the reader.

This book is a keeper. A must-have. It is the very book I would hand any adult involved in an Asperger Syndrome/Neurotypical relationship. It really is that good. And I do not say that lightly. As proof of my belief in this book, I will close by saying the following: people often ask my husband how he manages to remain happily married to me, his Aspie wife. Next time they do, I am going to suggest he refer them to Ashley's book.

Liane Holliday Willey, EdD
USA

Acknowledgments

As I am a private person, I will probably never meet the people to whom I am most indebted – the researchers and writers who toil to define and quantify the condition we now refer to as Asperger Syndrome: Simon Baron-Cohen, Uta Frith, Lorna Wing, Ami Klin, and so many others. They have been my source of inspiration when words and platitudes became confusing. When the final efforts were needed to pull this manuscript together, I turned to the professionals at Jessica Kingsley Publishers. They are heroes in the field of Asperger Syndrome awareness as they build a continuously flowing source of information and support for us all. Finally, I acknowledge the kind words of encouragement from my family and friends. They never gave up on me.

Note

The author of this work has chosen to use a pen name to guard the privacy of her family. While some readers may grasp for a stronger author voice, those who truly understand the intricacies of Asperger Syndrome and the social difficulties it entails will recognize and respect the need for privacy.

Preface

My background is in technical communication and curriculum development. I thrive when I'm solving problems, both technical and educational. When I discovered my husband had Asperger Syndrome (AS), I attacked the "problem" as natural-born researchers often do: I looked on-line, in bookstores, asked around the community nearby, and the world at large. I found plenty of strategies that sounded helpful, but proved disastrous at home.

As many of us do, I lost hope quickly. I found discouragement at every corner: "People with AS shouldn't marry" and "Most AS marriages end in divorce." I was looking for answers, not opposition. In my research I noticed that there are constant breakthroughs and improvements in what is available to children with Asperger Syndrome and their parents, but I found precious little in the way of marital help. I began digging for what worked and suffering through what didn't work.

Back in my early married days, a good friend of mine (an airline stewardess) advised me regularly to "Put your own air mask on first, sweetie." I have adopted this as a mantra for how I approach my AS-linked marriage. By putting on my own air mask first, I make myself a stronger person who is then capable of helping others around me. I am of no use to anyone otherwise. This book is my air mask – a conglomeration of most of the understandings and solutions that have helped me build a healthier, happier marriage.

This book does not have answers for everyone. No one does. All I can offer is an unquenched desire to determine what makes AS-linked adult relationships work. I believe that the most reliable solutions for now consist in wrapping our minds around the full extent of the diagnosis, then brainstorming for solutions within that framework that will work for us

personally. My goal as a writer was to organize insights and potential solutions into one easy format. You never know when one chance thought or story will give you the breath of fresh air you need.

Be forewarned: this book has no answers for how a person with AS can be “cured” or “recover.” This book isn’t going to enlighten your AS partner to his “errant ways” and it definitely isn’t going to change his behavior. It’s going to change *your understanding* and, in turn, both you and your partner will benefit. We can’t “improve” our partners directly; we can only improve ourselves.

I am writing mainly to the partners of those with AS. It doesn’t matter if you’re male or female, although I mainly use “him” since the statistics for the diagnostic rate currently dictate that AS male/non-AS female relationships are most common. I also make little differentiation between a marriage and a long-term relationship. From what I’ve seen, the dynamics are about the same. I hope that, as you read, you will be able to see beyond the titles of “him” and “her,” “marriage” and “relationship.”

Choosing appropriate terminology for labeling people is the most annoying problem when writing. No matter what terminology I choose, I will offend someone. Are we NTs (neurotypicals)? Not quite. Few readers will be neurologically typical. Are we non-AS or non-Aspies? Not really. I don’t define myself through my husband’s diagnosis. What are we then? I have chosen to use NT when discussing the distance between the AS and NT realms. I use non-AS when considering matters related to the AS diagnostic criteria. The term “Aspie” is a softer, friendlier term and I prefer to use it when showcasing the more advantageous AS traits.

It is equally awkward to label persons with AS. Is he a person with AS (politically correct people-first terminology), an AS partner (a term that is more visually pleasing), or an Aspie (a positive term similar to “genius,” “artist,” or “intellectual”)? I have chosen to use the people-first, diagnosis-second terminology (a person with AS) when speaking of matters pertaining to the AS diagnostic criteria. The term AS partner is used in more casual situations where describing a particular behavior or an anecdotal story. The word Aspie is used whenever possible, in the areas where the person’s strengths shine.

The information in this book is useful for both AS/NT couples and AS/AS couples due to the fact that there is significant carry-over between

the two. Even if you started out as an AS/NT relationship, you may end up functioning like an AS/AS relationship at times. People who marry those with AS begin to take on AS traits as time ticks by, becoming “aspergated” as they live with their Aspie partner day after day, year after year. No matter what combination of traits you combine within your relationship, insights can be gained by familiarizing yourselves with the intricacies of the diagnostic criteria and pondering the implications for long-term relationships.

Since this book is based on the very personal experiences of people who are often in painful situations, all names and descriptive details have been omitted. I have chosen to indicate only “a man” or “a woman.” All we need is the essence of the experience – what has worked for them. Some stories are specific examples from a few select couples that I know personally, many are personal experiences of my husband and me, and some are based on experiences that are so common that you’ll probably think I’m writing about you.

Disclaimer

Please note that the common examples come from widely published information pertaining to Asperger Syndrome. They are noted by: “For example. . .” These examples are fictitious and are based on information that is classified as common knowledge. These can be verified easily by reading about Asperger Syndrome (see the final chapter of this book). With the less interesting facts, uncommon details are added to help bring life to the examples. The examples cited as “One woman said. . .” or otherwise identified as belonging to a particular individual, come from personal friends of the author or from the author’s personal experience. No real quotes or example quotes were taken from any other source. The Internet was not used as a source for quotes as there is no way to verify the validity behind these sources.

CHAPTER 1

One Day I Woke Up

One day I woke up to find that the man sleeping beside me was still a stranger. I knew the rote information about his past – when he was born, where he went to school, his favorite color – but I didn't know him. I didn't know his hopes for the future, his regrets, his aspirations, nothing personal.

He knew next to nothing about me. He had never asked. He only knew what I offered. We had been married eight years.

This bothered me. I didn't have any preconceived notions of wedded bliss, but this seemed odd. We spent more hours together than most couples. We communicated. Ask either of us any type of rote information about the other and we would pass the test with flying colors. "What is her blood type? Social security number? Driver's license number? What were his grades in college? What courses did he take?" We knew every technical detail about each other but we knew nothing deeply personal. I had never heard him say, "I feel..." or "I wish..." I had been patiently awaiting a deeper level of bonding but it still hadn't happened. Something was missing. I suspected it had something to do with spirituality or repressed emotional problems in one or both of us, but I was at a loss for answers.

I spent the next three years examining his childhood. Was it something his mother did? Did he learn to repress everything? It seemed that his heart was under some sort of elusive shield that I couldn't lift. The more I

searched for answers, the more frustrated I became. His mother was a saint. His father was supportive and a superb role model. They did everything possible to help their son develop into a strong man. There hadn't been any trauma in his childhood that would have caused the anomalies that I was seeing in him and in our relationship.

I spent the next two years frustrated. I read nearly every marriage therapy book I could get my hands on, each of them proving a disappointment. I went into therapy only to walk away with a sense that both my husband and I were in a territory unfamiliar to the therapists. Everywhere I turned, the answer was the same: "This is odd."

During this time my husband's sister discovered that her son was autistic. With a diagnosis of high-functioning autism and hyperlexia, she dove deep into the autism community and found the resources she needed to help her child function and even thrive. After several years, she mentioned Asperger Syndrome. Did her brother (my husband) have it?

I surfed the web for information on Asperger Syndrome. The diagnostic criteria were shockingly familiar – my mind whispered, "This is him." Everything made sense. Everything fell into place. I felt deep pangs of regret for all the times I misspoke, for all the times I underestimated and overestimated him. He was trying his best to be the husband I wanted and needed but there were certain things about the way his brain works that made life extremely difficult for both of us. I never understood why we couldn't just take off and spend the day in the city. Or go on a hike. Or have a small change in plans. Why was everything so difficult? Now I was flooded with all the reasons.

As many newly discovered Aspies and their partners do, my husband and I followed the predictable path. I did full-time research about AS while my husband continued with his life, interested, but not interested enough to do anything about it. I read books by Tony Attwood, Liane Holliday Willey, Uta Frith, Simon Baron-Cohen, Ami Klin, Lorna Wing, Temple Grandin, and many others. I read into the wee hours of the night while he snoozed beside me. As I read, I understood why he didn't seem to care. He already knew all this information. He was who he was and he was at peace with it. I was the one banging my head against the wall in frustration over my lack of understanding. He couldn't share this information with me because he couldn't verbalize it. He only understood AS as "the" way of

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