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Counselling for Asperger Couples

Barrie Thompson
Foreword by Steve Bagnall

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Dedicated to my brother Derek
Acknowledgements

I should like to thank all of those clients who were bold enough to step into the world of Asperger counselling. I will be eternally grateful to them. In many ways they have enabled me to make more sense of my own life. They know who they are and I can only hope that I have given back to them in equal measure.

I have a very high regard for Relate as a counselling service. I want to thank the national office for providing me with a platform from which I could go on to do my research work into Asperger Syndrome, but I want to particularly thank my supervisor, management team and colleagues at Relate Coventry for their support in the work I undertake.

Most of all I want to thank my wife Dilys for her unending support, without which my counselling work and this book would not have been possible.
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Foreword

Some years ago, when I was working as Deputy Chief Executive of Relate, I received a letter urging us to do more for couples where one partner had Asperger Syndrome (AS). In fact the letter was quite critical of us, so I wanted to respond positively. But it was very difficult to respond positively as most of our workforce had probably never heard of AS. There was little prospect of introducing it as a topic in our already crammed basic training programmes, and there was little demand. People were not coming to us specifically asking for help in making successful relationships where one partner had been diagnosed with AS.

But the letter clearly had a point. If one partner had AS this was potentially a huge issue for the couple unless they could find successful strategies. At the same time many couples were struggling with this without even knowing it. They had not heard of AS, or, even if they had, no diagnosis had been given or thought of. We put on a one-day course for our counsellors, but it was merely scratching the surface. All we were able to do was to raise awareness of AS as a potential issue for some of the many thousands of couples and individuals we saw each year.

And that was that. There was no question of developing a model of how we could work more effectively with couples where one partner had AS. We didn’t have the capacity, there still wasn’t the demand and we didn’t have anyone to do it; anyone to champion the issue. Then one day Barrie Thompson walked into my office and asked me to supervise his Masters degree dissertation on working with couples where one partner had AS. Naturally, I tried to put him off. Good topic, but he needed not only to find enough couples, but they needed to be willing and able to talk with him, to be a part of his research. He’d never do it. It was impracticable!

Needless to say, he did do it, notwithstanding his full-time ‘day job’. He had already thought a lot about it and had tracked down the relatively few other people with the same interest, like Maxine Aston and Digby Tantam. He used his contacts and the Relate network to find couples he could talk with and we spent a fascinating year meeting to talk and think through the issues that were emerging. Did you need to know you had AS, or have a diagnosis, or was it just that you needed to recognise that certain patterns and behaviours might be an obstacle in your relationship? Were we all AS anyway, somewhere along a very wide spectrum? Does a label make things better or worse? He hadn’t developed a model for working
with couples at that stage, but it was the beginning and he clearly was not going to leave it at that once the dissertation was written.

That was more than five years ago and this book shows just how far things have moved on. People have heard of AS. Maybe they have read an article in a popular magazine. Maybe they are aware of children receiving extra help at school with AS related difficulties, and realised too that these children grow up and form their own couple relationships. So people nowadays are more likely to recognise AS and more likely to ask for help. This book shows there is help. Barrie does not overplay this. There is no cure on offer in this text, no false hope, but the real hope that comes from a systematic model with a host of ideas and techniques forged in discussion with real couples. There is honesty and realism and that is its power. When you can say with authority, ‘I have talked to scores of couples in this situation and this is what they say they have found helpful,’ people will hang on your every word. But neither is this a blueprint. It’s a model for helping, not a formula that works by rote. Each couple is unique and though you might use some of the specific strategies in this book, the book is more than that. It gives a strategy for forming strategies and devising helping tasks bespoke to each couple, each situation. That is the art and skill of it, and like all the best ideas its power is in its simplicity.

Why then does this matter? It matters because couple relationships are a fundamental building block of our society. It matters because the building blocks won’t hold together without understanding and inclusion of all types of people, including those with AS and their partners. So this raises wider social policy issues too, ones that politicians are not very good at dealing with. Politicians continue to squirm away from ‘couples’ as a social policy issue for fear of recommending one family structure and condemning others, or embrace the issue and then make a total hash of their response akin to a moth’s relationship to the flame. The political catchphrase ‘back to basics’ has haunted politicians of all parties for more than ten years. Nevertheless, I sense this will be an issue again at the next election. There is already argument about the so-called ‘couple penalty’ in the tax and benefit system. But just funding services for couples might be a better, quicker and cheaper start. I never met a couple yet who got a calculator out to measure their net tax and benefit gain/loss if they got together or split up and then used that as a key factor in their decision. But I have met a lot of couples and individuals who could not get basic relationship counselling when they needed it because they could not afford it! This is a book about practice not politics, but the practice described here needs to be accessible to the couples that need it. It needs to be on offer and that is a political issue.
This book also matters because ‘evidence-based practice’ matters. If private or public money goes into developing and maintaining services for couples, people want to know ‘Does it work?’ What was the outcome?’ This book gives an answer to those key questions through its clear case studies.

Overall this book says, not just that couples matter, but that AS couples matter. That you don’t have to believe, or follow, the counsel of gloom offered by a minority of friends and relatives you will meet in this book. There is hope. This is true not just for the couples living with AS who have had the courage to recognise the issue and do something about it, it’s potentially true for anyone in any family relationship. There is no panacea, no guarantee, but there is always the hope of finding the small, often very simple step that makes a big difference.

Steve Bagnall  
former Deputy Chief Executive of Relate
Introduction

Born and brought up in Caterham, Surrey in the 1950s, I had no reason to suspect that my childhood was any different to that of my four older siblings or, indeed, of my peers at school. A brief reflection of those days suggests they were happy ones, but deeper recollections evoke memories of more problematic times and suggest that the happy days were only so if they were on my terms! With personal problems born out of obsessive-compulsive behaviour, rituals, obsessional interests, physical tics and temper meltdowns. I was, according to my brothers and sisters, a difficult child. What brought about these behaviours is a tricky question for me to answer, but certainly they existed and created numerous difficulties for me, including isolation from all but a very few of my peers.

I'm not sure how aware my father was of my behaviour and mannerisms, as he seemed to be at work a lot, usually coming home after I had gone to bed. I believe my mother took the view that I would just ‘grow out of it’ and, although very loving, she never seemed to make an issue of my issues.

My principal obsession was football, but as a child it was not participating in the team sport that obsessed me, it was reading anything and everything remotely connected with football; relentlessly drawing football related pictures and spending endless hours on my own, just me, juggling a football. The irony of this particular obsession is that in my teenage years my two-footed ability with a football had the effect of creating for me a network of ‘friends’ in the various teams that I was asked to play for. I think my team mates had mixed feelings about me in that I never used to pass the ball or say much to them, but I scored plenty of solo goals and the teams I played for enjoyed much success. In any event, because of my football skills I was accepted and over the course of many years I became more of a team player, both on and off the field.

I have always thought in pictures and I see Asperger Syndrome (AS) problems in much the same way. I see the person with AS standing on one side of a river with questions, but no answers; problems, but no solutions. The answers and solutions lie on the other side, but as yet they can’t be seen or reached and the river holds many dangers from the speed at which it flows, its undercurrents and some potentially threatening occupants. How to get to the other side, to find answers and solutions, is the purpose of this book.
It was whilst working as a couple counsellor for Relate that I first heard the term ‘Asperger Syndrome’ and was immediately able to identify with it. My interest in the subject grew and, as a consequence of studying the disorder whilst undertaking my Masters degree, I now feel able to offer a solution in the form of a counselling model to aid people to cross that river; to have the opportunity of discovering the answers and solutions they have been seeking, or indeed to realise, perhaps for the first time, that within their relationship with their spouse or partner exists a problem that hitherto had been unknown to them.

The first seven chapters of this book represent the seven stages of the model in the order they are applied in the counselling process. The model allows for the stages to be revisited if and when appropriate. It will be seen by the reader as they progress through the book that a previous stage can be revisited if necessary, for example, if further exploration and understanding of an AS issue (Stage Four) has to be undertaken after some initial strategies or tasks (Stage Six) have been carried out by the client couple.

Chapter 1 briefly describes how I came to know about AS, but more importantly for the reader explains where and how knowledge of AS can be gained for their own benefit, this being a fundamental part of Stage One of my counselling model. Chapter 2 explains that initial counselling should be separate for both partners so that their own needs can be addressed before co-counselling starts. Chapter 3 is where the partners begin counselling together and embark on the process of developing a conjoint understanding of AS issues and personality differences. Chapter 4 develops communication between the couple and generates a better understanding of each partner’s perspectives. Chapter 5 makes use of genograms, lists, flip chart diagrams and any other form of drawing, usually done by the counsellor to aid understanding between the couple. Chapter 6 takes this one stage further by allowing the clients (where possible) to develop their own lists, strategies and tasks. Chapter 7 encourages the partners of people with AS to have their own space and time, and where possible to join (or even form) support groups. Support, both internal and external to the couple relationship is discussed here for the person with AS also. Finally, Chapter 8 gives a conclusion that includes a view of where we are now in terms of counselling opportunities for Asperger couples, now that a model is available to assist them in creating a better relationship for themselves.

It seems apparent that there are different levels of understanding of AS required according to the role and the needs of the individual. Whilst this book is primarily about couples where one partner has AS, the strategies and tactics described here to generate understanding, improve communication and generally enrich the quality of life of those who are touched by AS, can be used by counsellors, therapists, parents and teachers as well as
couples affected by AS who, for whatever reason are not in counselling at that time or, as is more likely to be the case, have no access to a counsellor or therapist trained in AS issues.

With regard to parents using the strategies in this book for their children, most of the strategies can be used effectively with older children and adolescents. For younger children some of them will be suitable, others may seem too advanced, but with some imagination may be adapted, whilst some may be entirely inappropriate. In each case the parents will know their child well enough to be able to determine if a particular strategy is appropriate for them or not, or they may seek the advice of their child’s teacher to see if they feel a particular strategy is suitable. It should be remembered that age is not the only criterion that should be considered when using these strategies. There are probably many bright young children who would put these strategies to as good a use as their older counterparts.

I hope that my experiences, my research and my model will have meaning for couples where AS or its traits are a presenting problem. I stress the importance of ‘traits’ because I don’t consider a formal diagnosis of AS to be necessary (unless the client does). What is important is the recognition by the couple that AS or its traits is negatively affecting their relationship and that they are willing to try to make positive changes.

Quoting Christopher Slater-Walker from An Asperger Marriage:

It is quite clear that there is little or no help available in the United Kingdom for couples or even individuals in our situation. Some kind of regular professional counselling, however uncomfortable it may be at first, where we could be brought together in a neutral situation, and each given individual advice on avoiding past situations and to work towards future improvements, would be enormously valuable. (Slater-Walker and Slater-Walker 2002, p.157)

I believe that my model goes a long way in addressing the shortfalls in specialist counselling that Christopher describes, but I feel it goes further than offering just individual advice, it also offers advice, guidance and support to the couple. I also believe that counsellors, therapists and other professionals will be able to identify with its simple methodology for offering help to such couples.

Pseudonyms have been used to represent the clients that I write about in this book, but where a particular quote from a client may identify them (if only to themselves), their permission has been sought for it to be used.

In keeping with other books and papers about this subject, Asperger Syndrome will be regularly abbreviated to AS and non-AS or neurotypical people will be regularly referred to as NTs.
Asperger Syndrome is defined by what is termed the ‘Triad of Impairment’. This triad relates to communication, socialisation and imaginative thinking.

Communication suffers in the person with AS due to the inappropriate use of speech, facial expression, voice intonation, gestures and other non-verbal language as well as delayed language processing and limited or non-existent eye contact.

Poor socialisation is exemplified by difficulties in either forming or maintaining relationships, a lack of empathy, poor social timing and skills and either part or total body-contact rejection.

Imaginative thinking, or the lack of, is typified by obsessional or ritualistic behaviour, an emphasis on egocentric thoughts and rigid or inflexible thinking where the views of others are difficult for the person with AS to understand. It is important to stress that the elements of the triad are in themselves a spectrum in which people with AS can be affected differently.

Other aspects or traits of the condition can include a tendency to apply a literal meaning to words and therefore being unable to comprehend innuendos, analogies or the like; a strong sense of order within their lives where a rule-bound and regulated life such as being in certain occupations gives the person the boundaries they need; a strong sense of order and sameness; being clumsy and having poor motor skills and spatial awareness; having a narrow and sometimes intense range of interests, and sensory overload where excesses of noise, colour, smell or movement may cause anxiety and prove to be distressing. Again, it is important to stress
that all of these traits may not occur in the same person, but if they do they
may well vary in their intensity.

In his quote at the start of this chapter Samuel Johnson makes a distinc-
tion between knowing a subject personally and impersonally. But is
knowing a subject the same as understanding it? In certain situations it can be, but one can read a book about the First World War and have a compre-
hensive knowledge of it, but not possess the understanding had by those
who were knee-deep in mud, surrounded by the corpses of those who
were once their friends, whilst feeling cold, hungry and scared, as bullets
and bombs rained about them day after day, month after month.

Or one can watch a Grand Prix race on television and be excited by the
action, but not understand the thrill and exhilaration of driving such a
powerful motor car around a hairpin bend at 90 mph or along the grand-
stand straight in excess of 200 mph.

So with AS, is the difference between knowing about it and under-
standing it the same as objectively observing it and subjectively experi-
encing it? Of course, other people can experience its effects from a
different perspective, namely the spouses, partners, parents and children of
people with AS, but this is a different perception; one that looks in on AS
from the outside and has a different understanding of it than the person
who experiences it at first hand. Indeed, during one session one of my
clients said, ‘My wife sees me compensate with my AS when I’m with
other people and she thinks I should compensate more with her. What she
doesn’t realise is that I put on an act with other people; I don’t want to put
on an act with my wife.’ He went on to say, ‘Knowledge about AS is one
thing and I’m glad my wife possesses the knowledge that she does, but it’s
not the same as being personally handicapped by it on a day-by-day basis.
When people see me acting “normally”, nothing actually changes in my
head – I just have to try to do things as people would expect me to and it’s
not easy. They just don’t realise just how hard I have to work to do that.’

I’ve had numerous clients where the neuro-typical (NT) partner has
had an impressive knowledge of the subject, but (understandably) little
awareness of how the condition has the potential to both strain and con-
strain those who have it. I have also had AS clients who lacked either
knowledge or understanding of their own condition, as they assumed that
their view on the world was exactly the same as everyone else’s. The skill, I
believe, is to try to balance knowledge with understanding and to try to
use this dual approach to attempt to discover the perspective of the ‘other’
person, irrespective of whether they are the AS or NT person in the
relationship.

For my own part, I came to understand AS in both of the ways Samuel
Johnson describes; by knowing it from a personal perspective (which can
be illuminating, but is nonetheless a very subjective experience), and by
finding out as much information as I could on the subject in the course of