

# **COPING: A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME**



**Marc Segar**

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# **Coping: A Survival Guide For People With Asperger Syndrome**

by

**Marc Segar**

Kindle edition: 2015-01-20

Transferred to Kindle by David Deley

This book, *Coping: A Survival Guide for People with Asperger Syndrome* was written by Marc Segar. This is a valuable piece of writing which is worthy of as wide a readership as possible and so was made available on the Web, at

<http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/~alistair/survival>

There is also a pdf version of this book available on-line at

<http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/~alistair/survival.pdf>

Print copies of the book can also be obtained from the address below, to which any enquiries should be directed:

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# Foreword



"Strange Game" sculpture by Marc Segar

So far as I know, this book is unique. A number of people who suffer with Asperger Syndrome notably Temple Grandin, Donna Williams, David Miedzianik, Therese Joliffe, Kathy Lissner and 'Darren White' have given us insight on their experiences, very much from a personal and sometimes idiosyncratic point of view. But Marc has gone a step further by writing an entirely practical and down to earth guide to the nitty-gritty of everyday living for fellow sufferers.

Marc knows from the inside what people with Asperger Syndrome need to understand, and much of his knowledge has been acquired through bitter experience. His expressed wish is that others should not have to learn by such a hard route, and that some of his own short term disasters should be avoided by others coming after him.

Marc has his own theories of how the problems of autism might be construed, and these will be of interest to anyone trying to understand the 'enigma', whether from inside or outside. Anyone with Asperger's would be helped by Marc's insight that 'Autistic people have to understand scientifically what non autistic people already understand instinctively'. His views are not

solely based in his personal experience, and his suggestions for coping draw on the difficulties he knows to have been experienced by others than himself

This book is packed with really helpful advice, some of which would be difficult for professionals to offer because of not knowing how relevant it might be. Marc can attest to its relevance, and this in itself gives it convincing value for any young man or woman coping with Asperger syndrome; but it is also exceptionally illuminating to families and to professionals who are trying to be helpful, and who often feel inadequate to the task. And Marc reminds us of things we are apt to forget: for instance, that 'slow progress is still progress'.

As someone often involved in counselling both people with Asperger syndrome and their families, I know that I shall be using this book as my most important aid. I believe it could enormously alleviate the frustration and depression suffered by so many young people as they try to integrate with a not very sympathetic world. All of us can be grateful to Marc for his achievement. We are very proud to publish this book.

Elizabeth Newson  
1997

# Table of Contents

- Foreword
  
- 1. Introduction
- 2. Getting the best from this book
- 3. Worrying
- 4. Looking on the bright side
- 5. Body language
- 6. Distortions of the truth
- 7. Conversation
- 8. Humour and conflict
- 9. Sexually related problems and points about going out
- 10. Finding the right friends
- 11. Keeping a clean slate
- 12. Coming clean
- 13. Education
- 14. Living away from home
- 15. Jobs and interviews
- 16. Driving
- 17. Travelling abroad
- 18. Opportunities
- 19. A Personal in depth analysis of the problem
  
- Further Reading

## The Battles of the Autistic Thinker

1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8

9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10



## Introduction

As far back as I can remember I have had intricate thoughts and ideas which have made me unique. As a young child in early primary school, I used to spend most of my time just doing my own thing and not really making much sense to people. My ever intriguing thoughts and ideas were locked up in my head and I couldn't communicate them to others.

When I was seven years of age, I got my diagnosis of autism in a form which is now known as Asperger syndrome. It was not that long afterwards that I was moved into a special school called Whitfields in Walthamstow, London, where for the next eight years I received specialist help, most of which came from a joyful, high spirited woman called Jenny. Not long after starting this school my family and I became involved in a family support group called Kith and Kids in which I am now a regular volunteer and work-shopper, always keeping active and creative.

At the age of fourteen I changed over to a school called West Lea in Edmonton where I was eventually able to take my GCSE's in which I did well. My recognition as being a worthy candidate for GCSE's was predominantly won by the French teacher, Mr Cole to whom I am very grateful.

At seventeen I was able to begin sixth-form in Winchmore where I worked hard at my A-levels but managed to turn myself into a serious target for other students' teasing and torment. It was also at this time when I first began learning how to stick up for myself, also realising that there were many unwritten rules about behaviour and conduct which everyone else knew except me.

I was then accepted by the University of Manchester to do a BSc in biochemistry that I have now completed. I began university under the same life long illusion I had always had of thinking that making a new start meant no more teasing to deal with. However, my social status in the first year was appalling and I spent a whole year living in a flat with seven other blokes, myself practically in isolation.

In the second year I ended up living in a house in Fallowfield where there happened to be three friends and two free spaces. I ended up there completely by random. I became best mates with Nick who ended up filling the extra space. He is a rebel through and through and has since taught me many of the tricks of the trade which I have needed on the highly worldly and sometimes hostile streets and night clubs of Manchester. Between my second and third year I booked a rather impromptu place on an expedition in East Africa where at my own risk I spent much of my time away from the group (which rejected me) learning all about the life-styles and customs of the local people. Never before had my poor mum been so worried. In my final year I was fortunate enough to live with people who were extremely mature and witty in a constructive way. Since graduating I have done a variety of work with children with autism both here and abroad. I now work as a children's entertainer and I sincerely feel that this has been a successful move.

I have now decided to write a book with a purpose. It is aimed at passing on my experiences of surviving as an Asperger sufferer in a world where every situation is slightly different for the benefit of other Asperger sufferers. I wish to lay out a set of rules and guide-lines in a style similar to that of the highway code in a format which doesn't change therefore not causing unnecessary confusion. My points are intended to be phrased in ways which are unambiguous therefore not causing people to get confused or apply things out of context.

I will probably have an audience which consists of both autistic people and non-autistic people. I would like to point out that many of the points I show might be down right obvious to some people but completely alien to others and I therefore wish to stress that I do not mean to be patronising or pedantic.

I choose to write this book now and not later because I feel that the relevant mistakes and lessons of my life are still clear in my head. Some people might see this book as being a little too worldly but I myself believe that if a borderline autistic person has to go out into this rather obnoxious world independently then the last thing they need is to be sheltered. I would strongly like to equip these people with the tricks and the knowledge they need in order to defend themselves and I don't wish to enforce opinions or be hypocritical. I have also drawn upon the benefits of constructive feedback

from parents of other autistic people in writing this book. I would not like to feel that any of my autistic readers will be placed under unnecessary pressure to start reading this book. To begin with just having this book lying around in one's bedroom might be enough to catch their eye and stimulate a healthy interest.

I intend for this book to serve the sole purpose of improving the quality of people's lives and would strongly urge any of my autistic audience not to get too stressed out trying to apply this book too quickly and to remember that Rome was not built in a day.

Even I myself am still having difficulties putting all these rules into practice, but it certainly helps to be aware of them.

[For more on Marc Segar see [The Battles of the Autistic Thinker](#)]

## Getting the Best From This Book

- Not everyone will understand everything in this book straight away but if something doesn't make sense at first then it might make more sense if you skip it and come back to it later.
- This is a book designed to make you aware of the many unwritten rules which most people instinctively know and take for granted.
- When people disobey these unwritten rules, sometimes they get away with it but usually they who break informal rules are made to suffer informal punishments. These punishments may include being laughed at, being treated as a less important person or being isolated.
- The most difficult thing about being autistic (or having Asperger Syndrome) is that so many people expect you to know these rules and live by them as they do, even though no-one has told you what these rules are. There is no doubt that this is extremely unfair, but unfortunately most people don't see it this way because they don't understand the problem.
- If you yourself are having trouble accepting that you are autistic (or have Asperger Syndrome) you could be making things even more difficult for yourself. Accepting such a thing will not only help you to get the most out of this book but may also allow you to forgive yourself for things you might be doing wrong and take away some of the pain which can only be holding you back.
- Usually there is an unwritten rule against talking about unwritten rules in public but it is normally all right to talk about them with parents, teachers, counsellors or friends when they are on their own.
- With many of these rules you are likely to want them explained to you. Unfortunately not all of them can be explained without moving away from what is important to the aims of this book. Also, many people are

able to follow the rules in this book perfectly but are not even consciously aware of them.

- If you are so busy questioning these rules that you cannot put them into practice you might not be getting the best from this book. However, there is no harm in spending some of your time questioning them.
- Some unwritten rules I have been unable to include either because they are too vague and depend too much on the situation or because I may not yet have discovered them myself.
- When you have read this book you might think that these are the rules to a rather silly game but the game is life and the rules cannot be changed.
- The problem with the game of life is that every situation is slightly different. Some things might be suitable in some situations but not in others. This book cannot tell you how to respond in every situation but can only set you guide-lines.
- Autistic people tend to remember detail, non autistic people tend to remember plot. Plot closely accompanies the detective work which enables most people to learn unwritten rules of society which are covered in this book.
- You may know some or many of the rules shown in this book already. None the less they must still be included for people who might not yet know them.
- Sometimes certain people might give you advice and criticisms which you find slightly patronising, pedantic or unimportant. This might often cause you to want to **rebel** but you could in fact be rebelling against the very things which are to be most helpful to you.
- Remember this book has been written partly on the basis of my own personal experiences and that what is right for me doesn't always have to be what's right for someone else.

## Worrying

- One thing autistic people are often particularly good at is worrying.
- A lot of your efforts in life might be getting a very poor pay-off and you might be finding that everyone around you is speaking freely to each other in a way which seems like nonsense to you.
- If you try to join in by talking back in nonsense people get annoyed.
- If other people can complain about you speaking nonsense why can't you complain to them about their nonsense? It's just not fair. Are you annoyed? If you are, you have every right to be but you cannot change the way things are. This book might however help you to understand other people's nonsense better.
- The problem with worrying is that it will often distract you from what you need to be concentrating on if you are to solve the problem.
- With some problems seeing the funny side can make it easier. If you can learn to laugh at yourself many of your worries might go away.
- Many people keep all their problems bottled up inside and look as if they're on top of the world but many people need to talk about their problems. The trick is to talk to the right people and not the wrong ones.
- Don't talk about your problems in public or to people who you don't know (except counsellors). If you do you will be broadcasting your weaknesses to the people around you. Don't think they won't be listening.
- Talking about your problems in public may get sympathy in the short term but will probably isolate you in the long term.
- You may talk about your problems with teachers, parents, close relatives and sometimes with friends if you can get them on their own.

- Sometimes but not always it is alright to talk about your problems with friends in a small group but it should be relevant to the conversation.
- When you do talk about your problems, try to do it without putting yourself down too much. Negative talk causes you negative feelings and negative feelings make you less able to defend yourself. You don't want to get bogged down into a vicious cycle.
- With reference to this last statement, try to get into a positive cycle if you can. This is called PMA (positive mental attitude) whereby thinking about your positive assets makes you feel more positive about yourself and better able to defend yourself from put-downs.
- Some times you may get labelled by people as useless or ignorant. This might be because you are not getting the opportunity to show any intelligence. NOT because it is true.
- A horrible feeling having to deal with is guilt. If you think you are to blame for something you must ask yourself if you know that you were doing something wrong. If you didn't know, or you only had a vague feeling about it then you cannot blame yourself, even if other people are. All you can do is to tell yourself that you will try not to do it again.
- Often apologising to someone can help to ease the guilt but ONCE is enough. If you over apologise you might start to look shy or vulnerable.
- If you think that the world is pitted against you, this is an illusion. Also, everyone feels like this occasionally.
- Remember to be patient about using this book. Personal development can be a slow and difficult process.
- Another problem you might face is that achieving things by half does not feel like enough. You may be an all or nothing person but remember this might be the autism speaking.
- Remember the key word is DETERMINATION and if you know in your heart you can do something then you must go for it.

## Looking on the Bright Side

- Many things are easier for intelligent autistic people than they are for non-autistic people.
- Autistic people can be especially good at learning facts, skills and talents when (*A*) they want to and (*B*) when the right sources are available to them. This can provide good career prospects and is sometimes enough to compensate for any disabilities.
- Useful gifts that autistic people might have include photographic memories, musical talent, heightened awareness of visual logic and extraordinary potential for computer programming.
- To show consistent punctuality in the workplace and to produce meticulously accurate high standard work, always meeting deadlines may earn you extra respect from your manager or supervisor.
- Some people say that honesty is not always the best policy but if you can recreate the truth accurately to the right people and yet be able to withhold the truth when confidentiality is needed your unsurpassable honesty might earn you great respect.
- If you are generally a quiet person who often only speaks when it is worth while this can sometimes be very welcome in the workplace.
- Having not been bound all your life by the unwritten rules of society may have made you a highly original thinker.
- In many situations where non-autistic people might be provoked or feel intimidated, autistic people can be unaffected and keep a clear head. You might be completely detached and immune to tense atmospheres and bad vibes which other people have to suffer. The problem with this however, will be that you are also immune to danger signals but this book might help you to recognise them.



- If you wish, you might be able to get formal allowances and benefits to help you out in life. Try not to see it as cheating. If you have had a hard enough life then perhaps you deserve this special consideration. Also, this might come in handy if ever you need to present yourself in a court of law in which case it may be a good idea to get the backing of a good psychologist who understands the problem.

# Body Language

- Body language doesn't just include gestures, it also includes facial expressions, eye contact and tone of voice and is sometimes affected by what you are wearing.
- Some people may have body language down to a fine art but many people find it difficult.
- Many people constantly feel paranoid about their own body language, including those who are extremely good at it.
- Showing the wrong emotion or laughing at the wrong time can be embarrassing. You may do this if you're thinking about one thing and the people around you are talking about something else. If someone reacts to this, tell them that your mind was elsewhere.
- If someone talks to you about something they find emotional and you don't respond to their body language with your own, they might think you are lacking empathy or that you don't really care.
- If someone tells you that you do not give enough body language you might have to exaggerate it in order to emphasise what you say but not too much. This will at first feel artificial.
- Part of body language includes courtesy things like 'excuse me', 'please', 'thanks', 'cheers', 'see ya' and being the first to say 'hi'. It is often an effort to say these things but then perhaps courtesy is supposed to be an effort. I have given informal courtesies here (not over-polite) but the politeness of the courtesies you choose may have to depend on the people you are with.
- We all have to be careful about standing behind someone when they can't see us because if they turn round they might get a fright. This is especially important if you are large or tall. In a densely crowded bus or train however you might not be able to help it.

- It can often be an effort to have a shower or a bath three times a week and to wear deodorant but it is much easier to talk to people if you feel you are clean and if you cannot be smelt. Remember, if you smell you might not be aware of it.
- If you are too good at body language or you look too cool, people are less likely to make exceptions for you if you do something wrong without knowing it.
- If you are an adult and especially if you are a large one, it is better to avoid running in the street unless the street is practically empty. Running for a bus or a train is all right if it will save you having to wait for another half an hour or you are in a hurry to get somewhere. On the other hand if you are going for a jog then wear shorts or track suit trousers so that people can see you are running for the purpose of getting exercise and hopefully don't feel intimidated.
- When you see someone in the street who you know it can sometimes be awkward but to exchange glances, smile slightly and raise eyebrows to each other is usually enough.

## **Boundaries**

- Boundaries are all about not getting too close to someone yet not being too far away.
- The correct boundaries will depend on the person you are talking to and also the time and place.
- If there is a physical attraction between you and someone else you will need give off AND read the correct signals. To do this the simplest rule to work by is that open gestures (such as open hands or arms) and gestures turned towards someone tend to mean attraction, whereas closed gestures (hands in fists, arms across chest) and gestures which are turned away from someone tend to mean avoidance.
- There is something to be aware of called the approach-avoidance trap. Quite often we need to be decisive about whether we are going to

approach someone, walk away or do neither.

- Also there is the problem of recognising other people's territory. If in some one-off situation you unknowingly encroach on what someone else considers to be their territory this can sometimes get you into big trouble. For example, at one time I lent a listening ear to a woman living in a house full of children. She was distraught because her over-possessive and just-out-of-prison boyfriend had just stormed out for no particular reason. I didn't realise that from his point of view it was his territory. Fortunately my personal safety was spared because he didn't come back until the next day. If after you make this kind of mistake you later have it explained to you it can all start to look so obvious.

## **Eye Contact**

- Eye contact is hard to get right because it is hard to tell whether you are giving someone too much eye contact or too little when they are talking to you.
- While people are not talking and when you are not talking to them, it is often best not to look at them. This is because people can usually see that you are looking at them out of the corner of their eyes and this may make them feel uncomfortable, in which case they might talk about you behind your back. To control your gaze might be difficult for you but it is by no means impossible.
- If you point at someone when you are talking about them to someone else, this may seem rude if they notice. If you are arguing with someone and point at them while giving eye contact, this may come across as quite aggressive. Try not to point at people – it will help you stay out of trouble.
- When you are talking to someone or they are talking to you, you are expected to look at them bearing in mind the following guidelines:
  - To look at someone for less than one third of the time may be communicating that either you are shy (if you keep looking down) or you are dishonest (if you keep looking to the side).

- To look at someone for more than two thirds of the time may be communicating that either you like them (if you are looking at the face as a whole) or you are aggressive (if you are looking straight into their eyes).
- To look at someone for the whole time giving steady and unbroken eye contact can mean one of two things. Either you are challenging them (the aggressive gaze) or you fancy them (the intimate gaze). However in other cultures (e.g. Mediterranean Europe) it can also symbolise companionship. For someone with autism it can be very difficult because first we have to be sure that it IS appropriate. Also fixed eye contact can forcefully distract us when we try to talk.

## **Tone of Voice**

- You might be one of these people who almost talks in a single tone without knowing it.
- Ask a trustworthy person if this is true and if it is you may have to exaggerate the intonation in your voice to emphasise what you say, but not too much. This will sound artificial at first.
- If you are reading a story-book to a child then the more intonation the better.
- The intonation in our voices is extremely important in determining whether we are being enthusiastic or sarcastic about something. It is also important in telling whether we mean something seriously or just as a joke.
- To talk in a single tone can make it sound as if you're depressed. When talking about something good or exciting you have to make yourself sound excited too, otherwise people tend to think it sounds strange.
- If you are a young man whose voice is breaking, then if you find it more comfortable just let it break for good. It may sound strange at first on the inside but it will be sounding much more natural on the outside. If you

are worried about what your friends might think which should only be a short term problem anyway, it may be useful to take the opportunity of letting your voice break while you are changing schools.

- Finally, remember not to speak too loudly and not to speak too quietly. This should depend on the distance between you and the other person and the voice should be quieter when a bit of secrecy is needed. Whisper when everyone else is whispering (or when there is someone asleep nearby).
- At times when you may need to talk extra loudly and clearly (e.g. on stage or in a play) then you may want to **project your voice**. To do this keep a nice straight relaxed posture and imagine that your voice is coming from your stomach, however strange this may seem.

## **Dress Sense**

- What clothes you wear gives off a message about you.
- If you wear bright clashing coloured clothes, perhaps intending to look confident, many people are likely to lose interest in you.
- If you wear cowboy boots, ripped jeans, heavy metal tee shirts and a studded leather jacket people might either be too scared to come near you or will expect to be able to talk to you about heavy metal music systems, life on the streets and various different night clubs. It is a a very difficult image to pull off.
- If you dress in natural colours such as blue, grey, dark-green, black or white which people cannot laugh at but still look trendy people will judge you on how you come across rather than what you are wearing which is likely to be what you need.
- It is often a good idea to hear someone else's opinion about what you should wear (talk to someone whom you can trust).

## Distortions of the Truth

- **Sarcasm** is when someone says one thing but means the opposite. For example – in response to hearing someone burp, someone else might say ‘how polite’. The easiest way of picking up on sarcasm is by listening to the tone of voice. You may need to defend yourself against sarcasm at times and this will be covered in the following chapters.
- **Not knowing** the truth is a common reason why people might distort it.
- A particularly nasty form of distorted truth is ‘**scape-goating**’. This is setting up other people to take the blame for things which aren’t their fault. What is even worse is having someone deliberately do something wrong for the sole purpose of getting you blamed for it. If this happens you must first work out whether it is just a joke or whether it is a serious set-up. If it is serious and the blame successfully reaches you, you may need to somehow prove that the wrong doing was not your fault in which case you must tell the right people that you think you’ve been set up and stick to your word.
- On the other hand someone might quite innocently create a false truth for the mere purpose of **fantasy play**. This might apply to children pretending to be comic cartoon heroes, adults dressed up in costume pretending to be Father Christmas or someone who is acting in a play.
- If someone asks you a question and giving them the true answer might upset them or cause embarrassment or unfair trouble to other people you may decide to tell a ‘**white lie**’ which is intended to avoid unpleasantness all round.
- If you don’t wish to lie you might still want to **withhold the truth**. You might be keeping a secret for someone or you might be trying to keep yourself or others out of trouble. In this case it may be sensible to avoid certain topics of conversation, otherwise you might be forced into pretending not to know something using awkward diversion tactics

(which often involve humour) or even lying. Also you may be expected to automatically know when something is to be kept a secret.

- If someone tries to get a message across to you without hurting you, they might decide to **drop a hint**. The best example of this is when a man is chatting up a woman but she doesn't want to go out with him in which case instead of saying 'I'm not interested, go away' she might slip the words 'my boyfriend' into the conversation.
- Sometimes it is possible to be misled by **figures of speech** (i.e. metaphors). For example 'I'm over the moon' means I'm very happy. If figures of speech are a problem for you, they can be looked up in certain books or you can get someone to teach you some.
- Sometimes someone might lie to you if they want something from you. The best example of this is a door-to-door salesman who wants your money. If he sells you a television that doesn't work then he would be **conning** you.
- In conversation it is not unusual for people to **exaggerate**. Someone who says 'I had about ten pints last night' might actually mean they only had five. People who exaggerate too much can easily be misinterpreted.
- If someone says something which sounds offensive in the literal sense 'You ugly mug face' but with a laugh and a smile, then they mean it as a **joke**. You often need to pick up on this quite quickly.
- Perhaps the most awkward kind of lies you encounter are **teasing** lies in which someone says something as a joke to see whether or not you believe them. If what they have just said is highly unlikely or people around them are trying not to laugh, they are probably teasing you. The correct response to this would be to laughingly tell them to p\*ss off. If you show doubt as to whether or not they are teasing you, they may see it as a sign of vulnerability. Remember they are probably never going to admit that they are teasing you, no matter how seriously you ask.
- People might start trying to persuade you to make a spectacle of yourself somehow. For example they may ask you to do a dance or sing a song.



Even if you can't see anything wrong with this yourself, it is important not to give in to them, no matter how persuasive they become. The correct response is the same as that for a teasing lie, only perhaps with a touch of anger. If you give in to such requests, you will probably become an all-round target for other people's teasing. If you have already done this in the past, don't worry, just don't let it continue.

- If ever joining in games like 'truth or dare' or 'strip poker' you could find yourself under even greater pressure to do something. In this case it is often all right but you might be asked to do something which is completely 'out of order' in which case if people become too persuasive you might just prefer to leave the room. If they are *true friends*, they won't hold it against you for more than a day.
- It must be remembered that not everyone is loyal to the truth. Also, many people select certain parts of the truth and reject others to their own advantages (e.g. in court cases).
- If you need to find out whether or not someone is lying and you have a good reason for doing so, asking them questions might reveal faults in their logic.

## **Misunderstandings Other People Might Have About You**

- If you have difficulties with your eye-contact or body language, some people might mistake you for being shifty or dishonest. If they think this they are probably wrong.
- If you don't react to other people's body language with your own, they might mistake you for being unsympathetic.
- Many people might make the mistake of thinking you are unintelligent. If this is because you rarely get a chance to show them signs of intelligence, there may be little you can do except to let them accidentally see you doing something you're good at, whether they like it or not, just as a one off. They might decide not to comment, even though they have seen your talent.

- If you try to come across as being cooler, wittier, tougher and more confident than other people, then whenever you break an unwritten rule people might mistake it for nastiness. In this case, it might be in your best interest to drop your pretence.

# Conversation

- It may be known to you that the art of conversation is carried out within a set of constraining rules.
- When people take part in a conversation, what they say normally has to follow on from the last thing that was said. We stick to the relevant so that the conversation flows smoothly.
- Be careful of stating the obvious. You may also wish to avoid asking questions when you can work out the answer for yourself. This way the conversation covers more useful ground.
- Try to avoid repeating yourself or rephrasing yourself when you have already been understood. This may be rather difficult because repetition of thought is quite fundamental to autism. The same thoughts can go round and round ‘obsessively’ in your head. If you have to go on talking about it, try to think up new angles or different ways of putting it; better still, look for a way of leading into a different subject. I take the approach of always looking for new things to think about. This seems to have been quite a successful move.
- There may be subjects that fascinate you and you really want to talk about them. If your listeners’ eyes look unfocused, or they keep looking over your shoulder, they may be getting bored. You can say ‘Sorry I’ve been going on, it’s a favourite subject of mine’.
- Also some people reply to things you say before even giving you a chance to finish your sentence. However, if they have anticipated you correctly then there is usually no need for you to finish.
- If you say something that doesn’t make sense to the people around you they might get annoyed but will probably forgive you. After all, everyone does this sometimes. Just don’t do this too often.

- If there is something you need to say which is not relevant but is important, for example ‘Bob phoned for you today’ or ‘there’s something I’d like to talk to you about which is worrying me’ it is best to find the suitable person when they’re not having a conversation. Try to find the right moment, get your **timing** right. If you need to pass on a phone call and think that you might forget if you are kept waiting too long, just write it down and leave it by the phone.
- If what you need to tell them is vitally important for example ‘Bob has just had a nasty knock on the head and is lying unconscious’, then you **MUST** interrupt their conversation.
- To join in a conversation you need to listen to it. **Listening** can be extremely difficult, especially if you have to keep your ears open 24 hours a day, but you can get better with practice. The most important thing to listen to is the **plot** of the conversation.
- Be on the lookout for eye contact from other people as it can often mean they would like to hear your point of view.
- It is easier to listen if you don’t make any assumptions or pre-conceived ideas about what someone is going to say.
- Some topics of conversation are **taboo subjects** and if you are in doubt they are sometimes better left alone.
- When a conversation becomes emotional people often say things like ‘cheer up’, ‘it’ll be all right’, ‘oh that’s wonderful!’ or ‘well done!’. When you try to say these things they might sound rather corny and sentimental at first but they serve the same purpose as remembering to buy someone a birthday card. They serve to open up the conversation and invite the other person to express how they feel.

## **General Knowledge**

- Although it is often true that autistic people are better at picking up details this is only when making a conscious effort to do so and there may be great problems in picking up the right details.

- Also getting absorbed into ones own head-space every other moment can make it extremely difficult to ‘learn things on the trot’ which is the way most non-autistic people are used to doing it.
- It might be difficult to join in a conversation if you don’t have the general knowledge which is needed. The problem with this kind of knowledge is that there is no one source from which you can find it out but here are some tips:
  - General knowledge in conversations is usually about sport (in the UK usually football), pop music, films, politics, the media, TV, people’s computers, clothes, hobbies and going out. It is however rare to find someone who is an expert on all of these things.
  - Many teenagers and young adults who are into music put more emphasis on the pop stars than they do on the music they write. Sometimes they even select their partners on the basis of who they look like in the world of music or sport. Sometimes with this type of person you just have to accept that you may not be compatible and look for friends elsewhere.
  - With reference to this last statement, sport (e.g. football) can also be quite selective. Sport is often a highly patriotic occupation in that people are friendly to each other if they support the same team but argue with and confront all those who support different teams.
  - TV, radio, magazines, libraries, video libraries and newspapers can help you learn about these topics. Also many leaflets which can be found in magazines give you a list of all the most popular albums, CDs and films. To force yourself to learn about things which don’t interest you, however, may be a waste of time since you won’t really want to join in with the conversations about them.
  - If you decide to teach yourself the general knowledge you need in certain conversations it is important that you also try to learn by listening to the conversations themselves, paying special attention to **famous people** when they are mentioned. This can make the learning process much faster.

## Names

- Picking up people's names can be a problem but it is very important for topics of conversation involving famous people or for following plots to films, books and especially to detective stories.
- Picking up names of people you know personally may also be difficult but it is not quite as essential as you might think. If you remember not to ask someone's name more than two times and after this if you still can't remember the name, to listen out for the next time someone calls it, you can usually get away with having a bad memory for names.
- It helps to remember names if you make a mental note linking them with faces; for example thinking things like 'Sarah's the one with the nose ring' or 'Bob 's the one with the moustache'.

## Humour and Conflict

- An autistic person's sense of humour is often about things which suggest silliness, ridiculousness or which appear slightly insane.
- It may be necessary to keep your laughter to yourself when there is something which is funny to you but not as funny to other people. Laughter is one of the best feelings in the world and to have to hold it back is a nuisance but nonetheless to laugh at the wrong times may annoy other people.
- A non autistic person's sense of humour is often to do with finding clever ways of pointing out faults in other people and causing them embarrassment. Everyone is a victim of someone else's humour at some time or another but some people are made to suffer more than others. Sometimes non autistic people can get quite ruthless with their humour. This is especially true amongst teenagers and younger adults who are perhaps less likely to care than older people.
- In the eyes of many zoologists, humour is a human replacement for the violence which animals use on each other to establish an order of dominance (the pecking order).
- No-one talks about the pecking order of which they are a part.
- Many gangs or groups of people are not particularly welcoming to outsiders but some are more welcoming than others.
- Often, the reason two or more people gang up on one person is because it gives them a feeling of being united together. For reasons such as this, it is often easier to talk seriously to people if you can find them on their own.
- If you say or do something that can be misinterpreted into a sexual context then it probably will be a joke, often at your expense.

- If you are a victim of someone else's humour, it is often possible to translate it (in your own mind) into constructive criticism and then it might be personality building.
- If a joke aimed at you is not too harsh it may be a good idea to laugh at yourself.
- If a joke or some sarcasm aimed at you is too harsh, you can say 'what do you mean by that', 'why did you say that', 'what's that supposed to mean', or 'that's not very nice'. You may have to use your discretion in order to choose a suitable answer but putting someone else on the spot can be quite a good defence.
- If a joke or some sarcasm aimed at you is downright hurtful, here is a last resort you can use. Calmly say that you found the joke hurtful and ask if it was meant to be hurtful. If the other person says 'can't you take a joke' or messes you around in some other way, stick to your guns and just calmly ask them again if they meant it to be hurtful. If they answer 'no' then you have got what you needed. If they answer 'yes' then calmly walk away and in future make it very difficult for that person to talk to you until they apologise of their own accord.
- Questions are often a much more powerful form of defence than statements.
- Remember that people who put you down unfairly and without purpose are often feeling weak in themselves and are mirroring their own feelings of weakness onto you.
- If you wish to join in and make jokes at the expense of other people, bear in mind the following:
  - Try not to make your jokes hurtful, even if other people do. People who do this are usually in the wrong.
  - Try not to aim your humour at people wittier or funnier than yourself because they might retaliate and will probably do better



than you, causing you to lose face. It is the verbal equivalent of picking a fight with someone bigger than you.

- Also try not to aim your humour at people quieter or more shy than yourself. It is the verbal equivalent of bullying or picking a fight with someone smaller than you.
  - Don't make jokes about people's mums or dads unless everyone else is. To make jokes like these at the wrong time can make people violent towards you.
  - Try to avoid laughing at your own humour.
- Comedy is not just about playful confrontation, it is also a very clever way in which people can accept the tragedies of life without getting depressed. 'If we didn't laugh then we'd cry'.

## Sexually Related Problems and Points About Going Out

- Amongst young people there is much more talk and humour about sex than there are people doing it.
- The rules for men and women are different.
- If a man has had lots of girl-friends then he might be called a stud or a stallion. This is a compliment.
- If a woman has had lots of boyfriends then she might be called a sl\*t, a sl\*g or a tart. This is an insult however unfair this rule may seem. When someone calls a woman a name like this for a joke, they have to make sure that it sounds like a joke and it has to be at the right time. If you are not sure when the right time is, it is better not to say it at all.
- Most men tend to be attracted to women who are good-looking, supportive and strong-minded but this may vary from one man to another.
- Most women tend to be attracted to men who are fairly good looking, gentlemanly, able to read their signals on boundaries (see [body language](#)), polite, clean, honest, not trying too hard to impress, adaptable, positive, supportive, charismatic, fun to be with, having character in their voice, not too meek but not macho either and who show an interest in their feelings. It is rare to find a man with all these qualities together and most women do not expect perfection.
- As surely as the rules differ between women and men so too do the rules governing gays and lesbians.
- Knowing all the different swear-words and various slang is important if you want to understand most of the humour amongst young people. If you'd rather not use these words yourself then you don't have to and this

might be a good thing. However, you can look them up in a dictionary if it is modern enough and large enough.

- Getting too close to someone can sometimes get you into trouble unless you have already established an intimate friendship with that person. However, you might not want to put up barriers either. If you are a man then if you allow other people to come up and flirt with you but you don't go up and flirt with them you will probably be taking a trouble-free option and this is probably good (see [boundaries](#)).
- If you are a woman be choosy about the people you flirt with. If you flirt with a man who has a serious lack of respect for *boundaries*, he might start to make a nuisance of himself.
- When it comes to physical contact between yourself and other people, try to develop for yourself a sense of what is and isn't 'appropriate' otherwise certain people may become mysteriously unfriendly towards you without ever actually telling you why.
- If you have a crush on someone don't let anyone know in public. People might start making fun of it and your chances will probably be ruined. You may secretly tell a friend you know and trust if you think they might be able to help. Tips for asking people out are mentioned in this chapter.
- If you are a virgin don't tell anyone and try to avoid related topics of conversation, especially if you are a man. There are plenty of virgins out there, many of them in their thirties and very few of them actually tell people. If you have already told people, don't worry, just don't tell anyone else.
- If people make fun of you just because you are a virgin don't let them think it is getting to you and try not to let them sway you into becoming someone with just one thing on your mind as this will cause you a lot of distress.
- Also don't worry about getting your end away just so that you can say you've done it. Besides when asked 'have you done it?' it is usually more admirable to laughingly say something like 'what's it to you',

‘that’s personal’ or ‘mind your own business’. This can easily fool the other person into thinking you’ve done it anyway. After all, if someone else said one of these things to you what would they lead you into believing?

- If you have recently been out with someone or been to bed with someone your friends and peers might rather persistently try to find out as much as they possible can about your encounter. This can be extremely embarrassing. In such situations you may decide to disclose absolutely nothing at all, hoping they will lose interest. Alternatively, you can simply NOT take it seriously and laughingly give them ridiculous exaggerations of what happened.
- Some men find it difficult to understand that the very idea of boosting their own egos by collecting memories of sexual liaisons with as many different women as they can is insulting or degrading to a woman’s ego.
- Many people in all honesty find their first experience of sex disappointing.

## **Nights Out**

- The best reason for having an evening or a night out in a pub or a night club is to have a good time and talk to people.
- You will probably have a much better time if you have a night out with friends rather than if you go out alone.
- On a night out the rules regarding body language become more important.
- Be careful with your gaze (unless of course you are talking with someone). If you look at someone for too long they will probably notice you out of the corner of their eye. This may cause them discomfort. They might then tell their friends about it and become secretively unfriendly towards you. This is especially true about men staring at women.

- Some people can be very polite to you but be rude about you behind your back. If you want a clue as to whether or not they really like you see [the rules on eye contact](#).
- If you have been invited to a party it is best to turn up at least half an hour late.
- It is good to have a bath or shower before you go out.
- It is best not to be the first on the dance floor even if you can't see anything wrong with this yourself. This doesn't mean you can try and persuade someone else to be the first.
- If you are at a night club and it is difficult to join in a conversation with people because of the music being too loud then you might be one of these people who is better off in pubs or parties at people's houses.
- If you like drinking alcohol because it makes you more sociable one or two pints is probably enough. Try not to drink to the extent that you make a spectacle of yourself because you might very well cause people to lose interest in you or to take advantage of you.
- Most people do NOT think that smoking is cool so don't think about taking it up for this reason.
- If you go to a party at someone's house there might be cannabis going around. Cannabis comes under many different names including gear, dope, weed, grass, pot, draw and marijuana. It is usually rolled up with tobacco into joints or spliffs. If you feel a need to join in with this walk of life bear in mind the many risks and know that it can make you less sociable while you smoke it. Also drugs might affect you differently to how they affect other people because your brain chemistry will be slightly different.
- Be very careful where and when you talk about illegal substances because they ARE illegal.

- NEVER buy illegal substances off the streets, it will almost invariably be a con and the people selling them might take it the wrong way and get violent if you try to be friendly with them.

## Chat Ups

- If you decide to go out with the thought of pulling or asking someone out in mind then the following tips might help you; but it is **essential** that you first read the chapters on *body language* (especially *boundaries, eye contact and dress sense*) *distortions of truth, conversation, humour and conflict* and *sex related humour*. It would be best to have in fact read all the points in the book leading up to this one.
- Chatting someone up is traditionally said to be the man's job but these days it is not uncommon for the woman to take an active role.
- If you wish to **chat up** someone else the best thing to do is just to talk to them and NOT get too close at first.
- Suitable boundaries may vary from one person to another (see *body language*).
- It is important not to appear too eager.
- If you are a man do not wear too much after shave.
- Don't chat up just anyone, make sure it's someone you like.
- If a man seduces a woman who is drunk, then in the eyes of everyone else he is taking advantage of her.
- If you are a man don't drop any hints about how much you fancy someone however subtle they may be. This will only weaken your chances. If you do drop any hints at all it may be best if they are hints of sincere admiration.
- If you are a woman and you drop hints as above to a man, he might start expecting more of you than you meant to offer.

- If a woman doesn't want to go out with a man, she will let him know by slipping the words 'my boyfriend' into the conversation. This might sometimes mean lying but it is thought by most people to be the most gentle way of letting the man know.
- Chatting someone up is not really that different from an informal interview. Don't forget to look at their face more than two thirds of the time (maybe more) whilst listening or speaking and smile a bit. If they are doing the same it means they like you too.
- If you wish to ask someone out, do it casually and sincerely and where no-one else can hear.
- The time it takes between meeting someone for the first time and becoming partners with them can be anywhere from a few minutes to hours, days, weeks, months or even years. If it only takes seconds however there is probably something wrong.
- You may find someone to go out with at ANY time, it is highly unpredictable.
- You might end up spending an evening or two or three with someone you really like and who really builds up your hopes up, only to find that they disappoint you. This can happen to anyone and is hardest to cope with when you are new to going out with people.
- Many people will go out with each other in secret or will spend much time flirting with each other but never admit that they are going out together. This is often the nature of an open relationship.
- Finding the right moment to make that first move is probably the most difficult thing of all and you may need to break some of the rules I have given (cheating a little). Asking someone out is a bit like gambling all your self esteem and taking complete pot luck. But if they turn you down it DOES NOT mean it was stupid to ask.
- **Always** be responsible and remember the importance of safer sex.

## Invitation

- It is bad manners to turn up at someone else's house uninvited unless they have said 'come round anytime' in which case they could mean about once a month or they could mean every other day depending on many things.
- On the other hand it can sometimes be difficult to know what constitutes an invitation.
- It is often best to phone first before turning up at someone's house.
- In some setting e.g. student hall the rules are slightly different because people are often running in and out of each others flats anyway. None the less still be careful.
- An Invitation to a party does NOT mean that you have to go if you don't want to.
- If you **gate-crash** a party with more than 20 people but keep a low profile, nobody should mind.
- It is sometimes difficult to know whether or not you are overstaying your welcome at some one else's house or whether they would like you to stay longer. If they say they are feeling tired then this might be a gentle hint that they want you to go. If they are smiling, giving you plenty of eye contact and showing an interest in the conversation they probably want you to stay.

## Personal Security

It is best for anyone, male or female, to avoid walking alone late at night down deserted or badly lit streets but here are some tips for protecting yourself:

- **Always** make sure your wallet is out of sight.
- You may do well to look over your shoulder every now and then.



- Don't look down, look straight ahead.
- Look like you know where you are going and show no fear.
- Following these guide-lines will make you look less vulnerable and more able to defend yourself. Some people find taking classes in martial arts helps them to be (and look) confident.
- If someone threatens you and you start running just keep on running.
- If it is too late or you are unable to run, let them have your wallet if they ask for it. This is a small price to pay for your personal security.
- If they take your wallet cancel all your credit cards as soon as possible and get them replaced.
- Never try and bargain or reason with your mugger(s).
- Finally, **ALWAYS** phone your mum or dad and let them know if you have decided to stay the night at someone else's house or they will be so worried they will call the police to search for you. (I'm assuming you remembered to tell them you were going out for the evening in the first place!)

## **Rape Crisis**

- In the unfortunate event that you might ever be on the receiving end of a sexual attack, it is probably a good idea to scream at the top of your voice **before** the attacker gets the chance to threaten you to be silent.
- The police do advise women to carry rape alarms with them just in case.
- Most rape victims know their attackers. What's more, most rapes do not happen on the streets.
- Don't forget that men can be raped too, though they are often more afraid to report it.

- If it has already happened to you, you are **NOT** the only one and it is **NOT** your fault and if you tell the **right** people they **WILL** believe you.
- If a simple 'no' is not enough, then what the hell is?

# Finding the Right Friends

It is often difficult to tell the difference between a true friend and a hoax friend but for autistic people, this can be many times harder. Here is a table to help you tell the difference.

## True Friends

- Treat you the same way they treat all their friends.
- Make you feel welcome in the long term as well as the short term.
- If they give you compliments they will be genuine and sincere.
- Will treat you as an equal.
- May help you to see the truth behind other peoples hoaxes when suitable.

What to do:

- Repay them with the same attention they give you and listen to them.
- Accept any compliments they give you by saying a simple ‘thank you’ and then you won’t make them feel silly in any way for having complimented you.
- Try to show that you like them using the rules given under eye contact (see *body language*)

## Hoax Friends

- May treat you differently to how they treat others.
- Might make you feel welcome in the short term and then drop you in the dirt.

- Might give you many compliments which are NOT genuine.
- Might often make unfair requests of you.
- Might want you to make a spectacle of yourself.
- May threaten not to be your friend anymore or play on your guilt if it is to help them get their own way.

What to do:

- Stand up to them and don't feel guilty about telling them to p\*ss off if they have said something which is obviously unfair.
- They could be the kind of person who gets pleasure out of hurting people more vulnerable than themselves because they feel weak and inadequate inside. Remember that.

### **Enemies**

- May ignore you most of the time.
- Will make you feel unwelcome and will notice all your mistakes and may bring them to the attention of other people.
- May give you anything from sarcasm, put-downs and temper tantrums to the silent treatment.
- Will often treat you as a less important person than them.
- May set you up to receive aggression or scorn from others.
- May threaten not to be your friend anymore or play on your guilt if it is to help them get their own way.

What to do:

- You might have done something to annoy them or they might just be jealous of certain skills or knowledge you have. If it is jealousy, they

will never admit to it.

- If you find them on their own at any time they might switch to being quiet and shy towards you and you might be able to ask them awkward questions as to why they behave differently towards you than they do towards other people. Also, if they can give you a good enough reason, it might be a chance to apologise if you have annoyed them in some way and say that you will try not to annoy them as much in future.

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- You are likely to meet many people who don't fit exactly into any one category in this table, in which case you must use your discretion.
- Don't be living under the illusion that everyone who knows you cares about you because they don't. People who care about you will probably fall under the category of true friends or will otherwise be family.
- Never underestimate the value of a **true** friend.

## Keeping a Clean Slate

- Whenever we go into a completely new environment and no-one knows us yet, we start off with an undamaged reputation, that is a clean slate.
- It is largely by breaking the unwritten rules of society that people dirty their slates.
- If you can keep using what you have read in this book, then it should be enough to allow you to keep a fairly clean slate, but don't expect to keep it cleaner than everyone else's slates.
- Everyone tries to keep a mental note of everyone else's slate in their little group. This includes things people have said, things they have done, things they can and cannot do and the general way in which they come across.
- It is mostly on the basis of your slate that people will be able to make fun of you.
- If your slate is already dirty, don't despair; it is often a reversible process and if you are patient by ceasing to do anything wrong it should slowly improve.
- Try not to tell someone too much about yourself or any of your weaknesses unless you have got to know them quite well because knowledge is power. This does not mean you have to bottle things up. (see chapter on [Worrying](#))
- If you wish, then by keeping your ears open you can learn about what's on other peoples slates.
- Some people like to stand out. People who stand out but who cannot keep to the unwritten rules whilst doing so, can very easily make themselves into a **target** for other people's teasing or neglect.

- Making a spectacle of one's self is also an easy way to become a target; but if you have Asperger Syndrome then it is often very difficult to know exactly what this means.
- Making a spectacle of yourself is normally about doing things in public which makes you look different to everyone else (*being the odd one out*).
- People who are able to stand out and be popular at the same time are said to have **charisma**. This is a gift which some people have but not others and it can often involve having a very accurate understanding of what is going on around you. It is popular belief that you can only have charisma if you were born that way but in the case of Asperger Syndrome this statement is not applicable.
- It is usually better to stand out from the inside than on the outside.

## Coming Clean

- Amongst certain groups of people, you might decide you want to come clean and tell them that you are autistic. This is entirely your own choice.
- You might, however, wish to tell just one person in the group (preferably the one who is friendliest towards you) in which case if you want it kept a secret, it might be a good idea to say so, otherwise the message might spread behind your back and it can be extremely difficult to tell whether or not people know.
- If you are coming clean for the first time in your life, it might be a very difficult move; but as people find out they might become a little less hostile and a little more accepting.
- On the other hand, you might have come clean to so many different people that you are sick and tired of saying it.
- You might find coming clean a more effective tactic as you get older. People who are caring and mature might bring many things to your attention in order to be constructive. However, it is better if they do this while there are just the two of you in the room. You may need to point this out at the time.
- Coming clean might make some people very interested in you and may give you a lot to talk about.
- If the message that you are autistic gets to someone who has been giving you a particularly hard time, it may make them feel guilty and do some good, but not always.
- The worst reaction you can get is when people become more hostile towards you because of having found out. This will nearly always be from people who didn't like you much to start with or who have little or no knowledge of autism.



- To deal with people who don't believe you when you say you are autistic can be difficult but to have a detailed understanding of the problem can be very helpful in shattering the myths (e.g. when people say you can't possibly be autistic because you make too much eye contact, or even because you can talk!)
- Amongst children or young teenagers it might be a better idea if you do not come clean, at least until you know them very well.
- Within the world of autism and Asperger Syndrome, there is quite a demand for 'out of the closet' Asperger sufferers, who are able to explain to parents, teachers and professionals exactly what it feels like to be autistic. There can also be money in it.

## Education

- You might have teachers who are holding you back by thinking you are not intelligent enough to take your exams. If you know inside that you are, then this can be extremely frustrating. Try to get the help of a teacher who you seem to get on well with.
- If you are being held back because you are not doing all that well at your English exams then it might be because you write about situations which are strange and not realistic, in which case having read this book might help you. Remember, this subject is more about feeling than it is about words.
- Listen to any advice or instructions offered to you by your teachers even if at first it sounds unimportant to you. It helps them to be sympathetic if you make it clear that you are listening by nodding or saying 'Right'.
- When people explain things to you which sound interesting or you are in a lesson, it is important to look interested otherwise people could easily assume that you are bored. Remember that speakers do watch the expressions on the faces of their audience.
- Pay close attention to your school reports because they are often chock-a-block with constructive criticisms.
- One of the problems you are likely to face in classes or lectures is concentration. **No-one** is able to concentrate 100% for a whole hour but to take short-hand notes which you will be able to look back on is normally to be expected.
- If a lecturer or teacher asks a question and no-one puts their hand up it is often because no-one wants to stand out NOT because no-one knows the answer.
- It is sometimes slightly difficult to distinguish between the information you do and don't need to commit to memory.

- If you try to show lots of obscure academic knowledge to get public recognition, then you might be going the wrong way about it, however intelligent the people you are talking with are.
- Remember that most people exaggerate about how little work they do.
- Try not to compare yourself too much with other people.
- You might get especially worried about your exams but remember that you can still live a happy and fulfilling life even without any qualifications at all, and many people have to.
- You might find maths, science, foreign languages and computer studies easier than things like English and History, contrary to what most people find easier.
- Make sure you choose a subject which leads to a job where you don't have to keep socialising and chatting people up. The 'back-room' jobs like computer, research or pharmacology are easier from this point of view than selling, management, teaching or social work.
- Remember that there are set rules and conventions about academic method and presentation. To conform to these guide-lines and closely follow a syllabus can be very significant to your final grades.
- One symptom of autism is that you may feel unsettled if your daily or weekly routine is disrupted. You might be able to structure your time so that you have time allotted for working in and time set aside for other things like watching TV, films, listening to music or going out. If someone invites you to go out try not to worry too much about your work, try to be flexible. You will have plenty more time for work.

## Living Away From Home

- You may start living away from home for a number of reasons, whether it is so that you can be independent or whether you are going away to university or even just staying in a youth hostel for a week or two to meet people.
- You will start off with a clean slate. To keep it this way see [relevant chapter](#).
- You might have to become quite flexible in your routine if you want to take the opportunities of going out. Also, you might have to wait your turn to use the kitchen when there are too many people, or have to compromise your favourite TV program now and then when people want to watch something on the other side (if there is only one TV).
- Your routine might be quite complicated and hard to manage if you are doing a course or a stressful job, in which case it can be extremely useful to plan each week in advance (which may take about 20 minutes each Sunday night but will save you much more time in the long term). Use a diary.
- It is equally important to have everything you need gathered up the night before work, so that you are not in a frantic rush trying to get organised in the morning before you have to rush off.
- **Always** knock on the door and await a reply before walking into someone else's room or office, otherwise you will probably be told off.
- **Always** let your flatmate know if you are going away for more than 24 hours or they **WILL** worry, even if they aren't the nicest people to live with. If you were unable to do this for some reason, phone them.
- People might expect you to do the washing up or some house cleaning every now and then. This is called **pulling your weight** and is supposed to be equally fair on everyone and be a team effort to keep the place

clean and tidy. Some people don't mind mess as long as it's hygienic mess but some people dislike mess and think that everyone should pull their weight and tidy up regularly. If you are lucky you will be living with other people who share the same attitude as yourself. Also, people who dislike mess are more likely to comment if they feel that you don't take a bath or shower often enough.

- You might have a whole array of different kitchen tactics to that of everyone else. In the eyes of some people this is all right as long as your tactics don't leave any unnecessary mess behind and your table manners are all right but some people might make comments about it and ask you to do things the same way as they do. It is your choice whether you decide to remain original or conform, but give some thought to both options.
- By making mental notes about the ways in which other people do their cooking, washing up, house cleaning or shopping you might be able to learn faster, more efficient ways of doing these things yourself. You may be taking short-cuts which do in fact make extra work for you afterwards.
- If you have a bit of free time on your hands, you might be able to nip out to the shops, buy the ingredients you need and cook yourself a really good meal. If you have access to a recipe or a set of instructions on the side of a jar, try to make use of it rather than rebelling against it. Also, it is somewhat cheaper to plan in advance what ingredients you need and get them along with the rest of your shopping at the supermarket rather than the corner shop.
- Non-autistic people are quite good at remembering which plates, cups, saucepans or cupboards belong to which people. Things like this allow them to do detective work and notice things.
- If people in your flat smoke cannabis or do other illegal substances, keep quiet about it when outside your flat (see *nights out* for further information).

- If you follow the rules given in the chapter *Body language* it might make you a slightly easier person to live with.
- Remember also that there might be a ‘pecking order’ in the flat which everyone is fairly aware of but no-one ever talks about.
- You might be living in a flat where everyone is being nasty towards you, in which case it might be a good idea to move out and live somewhere else, starting again with new people and a clean slate.
- If you are able to, get the ‘contract’ checked out professionally before signing it and moving into a new place.

### **Using the Phone**

- Always answer the phone in a clear polite but relaxed voice.
- When speaking on the phone, it can be quite a relief to know that body language and eye contact are no longer important but tone of voice and clarity of speech become more important.
- If someone asks to talk to someone else, ask politely ‘who is it?’ to get their name and then say ‘ok I’ll just go and look for them’. This will give the other person the opportunity to ask ‘who is it’ and perhaps to say ‘tell them I’m not in’ in the event that it’s someone they would rather not speak to.
- If that person is not in you may be asked to take a message in which case if you think you might not be able to remember to pass it on you **MUST** write it down and leave it somewhere near the phone.
- When phoning other people you don’t want to phone too early in the day or too late at night. This might mean having to be very patient. If you wish to phone someone you have met on a night out who you fancy, it is important not to phone them too soon after meeting them. It is best to leave it at least a day so they don’t think you’re coming on too strong.

### **Guests**

- When you have a friend round or when you go to visit someone else through invitation, or even if you are living with a friend there are a number of points which are useful to know.
- It is usually the responsibility of the host to offer the guest a drink. The guest shouldn't have to ask.
- Sometimes you have to put a little bit of effort into making a guest feel welcome.
- Try to avoid situations in which the other person might feel slightly 'cornered' either physically or verbally. Well at least until you know them quite well.
- Try to avoid situations in which you unexpectedly leave a friend or a guest on their own.
- Knowing when to say goodbye is a difficult process which can sometimes involve people dropping gentle hints or jokes about chucking the other person out. If you don't pick up on the message early enough then it can sometimes create tension. However, a laugh and a smile can often make the goodbye process much more graceful.

## Jobs and Interviews

- In an interview *body language* is extra important and you want to look confident and relaxed. You are also expected to sit still with your arms by your side or on your lap and a good posture and this might be an effort for you. You are expected to speak clearly and professionally.
- First impressions are extremely important.
- Prepare as many possible answers for as many possible questions as you can but don't over rehearse or rigidify your answers. It is good to get help at this stage.
- Know what your skills and talents are.
- The interviewer will often drop you a few **hints** towards the end of the interview (using mainly *body language*) to let you know whether you are likely or unlikely to get the job.
- There are courses and classes around which teach interview technique.
- All the same rules apply in the workplace as they do anywhere else; but the one difference is that there is something at stake, your job. This means it is extra important to keep a clean slate or you might be a target for **scape-goating** which is a very nasty threat to your job (see *Distortions of the truth*).
- If in doubt keep quiet. This is often seen as a good quality in the office.
- Like it or not, as an autistic person or someone with Asperger syndrome some jobs will be more suitable than others. Examples are as follows:

### Suitable jobs

- Graphic designer
- Computer programmer
- Computer technician or operator



- Research scientist
- Medical research scientist
- Architect
- Pharmacist

(Which are respected professions which generally take place in environments with people who tend to be perhaps just a little bit more accepting of the needs of those who worry. Please note that I have specifically chosen to show quite difficult careers here and there are plenty of easier careers available.)

### **Unsuitable jobs**

- Salesman
- Manager
- Solicitor or lawyer
- Police officer
- Doctor, dentist or health inspector
- Secondary school teacher
- Airline pilot

(All of which can be highly stressful and competitive occupations that involve making difficult decisions and compromises under intense pressure from other people; some also involve using and interpreting body language in a subtle way.)

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- In the workplace, everyone is usually under a constant struggle to keep their jobs. This means being organised and methodical all the time to avoid confusing situations. Good communication is very important.
- Sad as it may seem, devious games can occur in the work place and sometimes you might feel great compassion for someone else who is on the verge of losing their job unfairly. However, to defend them can often be putting your own job at risk as well. If you do wish to defend someone against a higher authority first ask yourself whether it is worth the risk.

- Be on the lookout for the ‘authoritarian personality’. These are people who tend to be very much bound by the rule-book, very respectful of higher authority, bossy to junior staff and quite hard to reason with. What really needs to be remembered is the fact that these people can often be much more cunning than they look.
- If you are doing your own research you may find yourself in a situation where you wish to patent copyright or create proof of ownership of a piece of work you have produced. The easiest thing to do is to make a copy, seal it in an envelope and post it to your home address. It gets the date stamped on it in the post. Don’t open the envelope when it arrives but keep it sealed and stored away in a safe place. Recorded delivery may be more reliable and legally airtight. Also, keep any notes you have written whilst producing your work. You now have legal proof that it is your work and should not have to worry too much about it falling into the wrong hands.
- You tend to meet three different kinds of people in life, Meek, Assertive and Aggressive. Aim to be the **assertive** type.

### Meek

- Looks down.
- Keeps his fists clenched (a closed signal).
- Often speaks too quietly.
- Steps backwards when spoken to.
- Has a weak handshake.
- Is easily put down by others.
- Is often angry with himself for allowing others to take advantage of him.
- Is shy and withdrawn in company.
- Cannot accept compliments.
- Says ‘oh dear!’ and ‘sorry’ too much.

### Assertive

- Has an upright but relaxed stance.
- Maintains eye contact when listening or speaking (for over two thirds of the time) looking at faces as a whole.

- Has a firm handshake but not too firm.
- Is able to say 'no' when needs must.
- Can express his true feelings.
- Is interested in other people's opinions as well as his own.
- Tries to treat everyone as equals.

### **Aggressive**

- Stands still with stiff, rigid posture.
- Keeps his arms folded.
- Shouts and points finger.
- Bangs desk or table.
- May give eye contact almost the whole time he is speaking (looking straight into the eyes).
- Is better at talking than at listening.
- Likes telling others what to do.
- Thinks his own opinion is always right.
- Likes to tell other people they're useless.
- Tends to make himself quite lonely because people feel they have to be careful around him.

## Driving

- Driving is quite a bizarre skill to learn. How fast you pick up driving often has nothing at all to do with your intelligence in other things. Some real dimwits are still able to drive in as few as five lessons whereas some really intelligent people can need as many as fifty lessons.
- I myself went through sheer hell learning to drive. The most difficult thing for me was planning in advance and thinking ahead. I also had a very heavy telling-off from one of my driving instructors.
- Try to find a sensitive instructor if you can. Some driving instructors can be opinionated, randy, impulsive or impatient.
- As already pointed out, try not to compare yourself with other people. Other people might be exaggerating about how few lessons they needed and might be lying when they say they passed first time.
- Slow progress is still progress.

## Travelling Abroad

- If you travel abroad somewhere for whatever reason you might find you have to adapt yourself to a rather different way of life. This might be quite pleasant, or it might be quite difficult and inconvenient for you (culture shock).
- Whenever you are in a different country take extra care crossing the road because in some countries there is a lot of reckless driving, drunken driving, speeding, cutting corners, shouting at other drivers and showing off.
- If you are travelling of your own accord be careful about your choice of destinations. Find out about the reasons for which most people go there and DO NOT rush your decision.
- If you decide to go on an *expedition*, remember that you might have to be travelling and living with the same group of people almost 24 hours a day and that the rules given under the chapter *living away from home* might apply twice as strong. Also, you might be living in a way which is particularly uncomfortable and inconvenient.
- If you end up not getting along with the group as well as you would like, you might decide to venture away from the group on your own and talk to the local people, who might welcome you with open arms and treat you as an honoured guest in their home where the pace of life might be much slower and calmer than you are used to.
- If you end up as a guest staying at someone else's house along with all your luggage and possessions, be sure to write down their address and/or telephone number as soon as possible, preferably in secret, so that if you get lost (e.g. in town) you won't get permanently separated from them. With people who are over-friendly, it is especially easy as an AS sufferer to become over-trusting, even if you don't think this will be a problem at first.

- On the other hand in some countries the people tend to be colder and less interested in you than they are in the west and it can be quite awkward to talk to them. There may also be a lot of tension and possibly heavy prejudices and racism about in these places, so if you are of a different religious faith it will be best to keep it to yourself.
- In third world countries things don't tend to run as smoothly as they do in the west and you will be living a more risky existence. Even if the people are excessively friendly, they can sometimes turn quite nasty if provoked or offended in some way. The value of human life might be a lot cheaper than it is in the west.
- In the third world the people might be as much as a hundred times poorer than people in the west, but this does not mean that you will be helping out by giving away your money. In poor corrupt countries money always has a habit of finding its way to the richest and most unscrupulous people who exploit people poorer than themselves. Charities like Oxfam and Comic Relief are highly trained and experienced in getting the money and the resources to the right people in the right places.
- In many third world countries, the police, court system and law might be extremely harsh and corrupt so keep out of trouble and try to keep a low profile. The police might be able to get a lot of bribe money by setting you up as a scapegoat and then taking you hostage in one of their disease ridden, often crowded and highly uncomfortable police cells.
- If you are travelling abroad independently for the first time, it is most certainly best to stay in the Western World and travel to countries like France, Holland, Canada, Spain, Scotland or Switzerland, parts of which can be very beautiful and pleasant.

## **Bartering**

- In many countries (all over the third world and also over much of Mediterranean Europe), you will be constantly expected to barter and bargain in the market place. The generally agreed prices can vary

anywhere from one eighth to one half of what you would normally expect to pay for them in the shops in the west.

- Bargain with a smile and in good spirit but remember that it is always your own responsibility to be assertive and not let yourself get ripped off. It is also entirely the sale merchant's responsibility not to sell at a loss. If you have made a good bargain for yourself they may play heavily on your guilt as you walk away by saying something like 'you're taking the shoes off my children's feet!'
- Remember that getting ripped off can make you feel angry with yourself.
- These people don't sell at a loss, some of them may have decades of selling experience behind them.
- If someone tries to make a bargain with you which is unfair or seems untrustworthy, simply say 'no thank you' and calmly walk away.
- It is easy to get ripped off if you are unfamiliar with the currency.
- If you are making an informal deal with someone back at home, you want to be neither too generous nor too stingy. To find the balance can be hard.

## Opportunities

- The first move in finding yourself a social life is often seeing an advert in your local paper and picking up the phone. The most difficult step can often be just picking up the phone.
- **Clubs and societies** can be a good way of meeting people but often require you to be good at a specific hobby or interest if you are to be valued by the group. However, there are also singles clubs and places that exist simply for the purpose of meeting people.
- **Voluntary work** is advertised in the papers and probably also in your local library.
- Also, it could be a very good move to enrol in an evening class. **Counselling courses** and **psychology classes** may give you a lot of extra insight into social interaction. Even if you don't actually pass the exam, you could easily find yourself drawing more benefit and reward from the course than any other student.



## A Personal In Depth Analysis of the Problem

I personally believe that the best key to overcoming autism is understanding it. Autism is caused by various biochemical processes that affect the way the brain develops.

For some time I believed that the brains of autistic people were structured slightly differently so that there is a greater tendency for neuronal impulses to travel up and down (literal thinking) and a lesser tendency for them to move sideways (lateral thinking). This phenomenon would be spread throughout the whole brain rather than being local to certain regions. Experiments with neural nets on computer systems have shown that nets which emphasise up and down movement of information (like in autistic brains) give excellent storage of detail but show less ability to distinguish things. Nets which emphasise sideways movement of information show excellent distinguishing power but are not as good at storage.

On the much larger and more complex scale of the brain, this means that non-autistic people are more aware of plot but autistic people are more aware of detail. Autistic people are better at logical problems but less intuitive. This doesn't necessarily mean that autistic people should have brilliant memories, on the contrary they can often be quite absent minded about certain things. The heightened sensory awareness and constant recall of extra details, many of which are unimportant can be a never ending source of distraction to concentration and learning skills. It can be especially difficult to pick up information regarding the culture one lives in especially in today's Western society which I feel is suffering from cultural overload (see [general knowledge](#)).

What I now believe is similar to the above but slightly modified. I now feel that perhaps the root cause of autism is an increased bias towards the re-assessment of previous thoughts (hence the repetitions and rituals). Consequently the capacity for intuition and context awareness is reduced.

To assess a social situation, one needs to pick up on as many clues as possible and swiftly piece them together. The final deduction is often greater

than the sum of its parts.

Also, a difficult thing for an autistic person is 'finding a balance' and this may show its self at all levels of behaviour and reasoning. The ability to adapt to the 'situation continuum' and conform to the surrounding world is however an extremely ancient survival strategy which is most relevant in the social sector of life.

If I could explain Asperger Syndrome in just one sentence it would be as follows:

**Autistic people have to understand scientifically what non-autistic people already understand instinctively.**

## Further Reading:

- Allan Pease (1997–1984) *Body Language*, Sheldon Press.
- David Cohen (1992) *Body Language in Relationships*, Sheldon Press.
- Ursula Markham (1993) *How to deal with difficult people*, Thorsons.
- This survival guide is continued as a WikiBook at:  
[http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Autistic\\_Survival\\_Guide](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Autistic_Survival_Guide)

# **The Battles of the Autistic Thinker**

**By Marc Segar**

**About Marc Segar**

Marc Segar (1974-1997), BSc Hons in Biochemistry, University of Manchester. We are very grateful to Marc's parents for their help and support in getting his work the wider audience it deserves. Marc Segar's tragic death in 1997 at the age of twenty three filled those who knew him and his work with grief and dismay. We felt his death cheated us of the inspiration we had come to expect.

Despite the brevity of his career Marc's thinking was already beginning to play an important part in the development of our understanding. We miss him.

# Chapter 1



As far back as I can remember, I have had thoughts and ideas which at the time, seemed to make me unique. In actual fact, many of my earliest memories are theories I had about the world around me. Perhaps my earliest thoughts were about phonetics. Without actually knowing what “phonetics” meant and probably not even knowing the alphabet, I was able to think to myself that "P" was a harder version of "b" as was "T" to "d", "K" to "g" and "S" to "z". This all worked reasonably well inside my own head but at the time I was only 4, an age at which apparently I wasn't even speaking yet except to express basic needs. However, I didn't know I wasn't speaking. I simply assumed I could.

At the same age, I used to wonder about matter, thinking that different colours must have represented different kinds of matter. If you like, I believed in the plasticine principle.

Also, I used to wonder what would happen if I were to travel along the earth or on a road in a straight line for a very great distance. Would I eventually end up against a card-board wall which constituted a small part of the great card-board box which enclosed the universe? And if so, what was beyond it? Perhaps there were more card-board boxes, all stacked up inside an even greater card-board box. When you make a theory that depends on another theory which in turn depends on another, this is the sort of conclusion you may form. It is one of the major pitfalls of linear thinking which can wreak havoc with your interpretation of social situations.

When I started school I had a teacher who took a sympathetic and open minded approach. My classmates would accept me for who I was even though I spent so much time daydreaming and wandering over to the wrong side of the classroom while the teacher was reading a story. Even at that early age the other children could probably tell there was something wrong, despite the fact that I never suspected anything of the sort; and this was to be the case for a long time to come.

Throughout my life people have treated me differently to the way they treat each other and when I ask why, or what is wrong with me, they have never seemed to be able to tell me. They say, it's just a bit of everything.

What really seems to throw people is that they can't seem to understand that a six year old boy who knows all the planets in the solar system and who can already subtract five from three may not yet have worked out that it is inappropriate to climb in the dust-bins during play time or that it is naughty to chew up ones pencil and stare out of the window during a lesson.

In all honesty, many of my skills and snippets of scientific knowledge didn't come from the classroom at all. They were the answers my parents would give me in response to my rather obscure questions. They did actually serve quite a useful purpose in that people could see that I may have been very odd but I wasn't stupid. Also, it has given me a rather scientific outlook on life, without which I probably wouldn't have been able to succeed in the way I have. I have analysed social interaction from a scientific point of view enabling me to participate as an individual within a group.

My mother used to walk me to school and back every day. This was my favourite time for singing Beethoven's violin concerto which my father used to listen to. Emma, my sister, would be in the pram earning motherly attention while I carried on singing Beethoven, completely unaware of the symbolic and emotional value of having a new person in the family. When my sister was approaching the age of two, this was probably when we first began to play together. Our games would usually involve a small number of characters or personas represented by dolls, teddies, other toys or even just objects. We would organise them into lines and bash them about a bit.

After seeing how indifferently I related to action man, my parents introduced me to Lego. Lego was the perfect toy for me. I used to spend whole days just making shapes and structures.

Back at school I had a best friend, Ben, whose work was suffering as a result of his attempts to look after me. On the whole, people in the same class as me would casually defend me and look after me at playtime. However, when I chose to go running off in whatever direction pleased me, I was a sitting duck. I don't really know how the staff interpreted my funny rituals and habits but they would probably have classified me under the heading "attention seeker". It's actually quite strange the way in which I used to think of the staff. Myself, the other children and my parents were all people. However, teachers weren't people they were teachers and dinner ladies weren't people, they were dinner ladies. It is almost as if I thought of them as a separate species in the animal kingdom, beset with the role of looking after people.

When it came to puppet shows I was even more confused. Puppets aren't really alive. However, we're supposed to think they are, well maybe not. We are at least supposed to react towards them AS IF they are real, even though at the back of our minds we know the truth of the situation. Father Christmas had me even more confused than this. I was easily confused by any situation which involved any separation between truth and supposition. For a long period of my life I have been very easily deceived.

To the school tear-aways I was a real object of interest. If they told me to do something, quite often I would do it, thinking I was being good and doing as I was told, not really knowing that it was against the school rules and it would

get me into trouble. When they said “Umm, I’m telling”, I would immediately realise that I was breaking the school rules but that I didn’t know about it at the time and that it was extremely unfair. I would respond to this injustice by saying “No, no, don’t”, making me look like a real attention seeker.

When I wasn’t a target I was a reject. I remember how desperately I used to wish to be part of other children’s games where the grass was always greener. I used to wish I could take a bag of marbles to school, join in with the game and come home with more, instead of always losing them all to little pirates and con-artists.

I may have been unaware that there was anything wrong with me but the feelings of rejection I felt then were to crop up time and time again for years to come.

Dr Elizabeth Newson came to visit us on one occasion when I was in my third year of schooling to try and determine what was wrong. She talked to me for an hour about my favourite thing, the solar system. Impressed with my knowledge of the subject, she suggested autism to my parents but with uncertainty. My parents replied with “now try talking to him about something else”. On this note, my diagnosis was almost certain and my parents were worried at the prospect that I had an incurable social disorder but were at the same time relieved that finally, someone had shed some light on the problem.

My obsessions and interests showed plenty of depth but very little breadth and my behaviour patterns were ritualistic and repetitive. At school I wasn’t coping either with the lessons or with the other children, I was disruptive and day-dreamy and I would usually behave as if no-one was watching me.

At the age of eight I was taken out of mainstream school and placed into Whitefields special school in East London, in a new department known as DNCC, which stood for disabled non-communicating children. This was soon replaced by BCD “behaviour and communication difficulties” which seemed like a much more appropriate description. Here, I was first acquainted with Jenny who was to be my teacher for a long time to come. I was part of a group of five children, all with the same problems as myself, one of whom was another boy called Marc. It was really quite a contrast from the previous classes I had been in where I had been one of 30.



This other Marc had a rather amusing directory of “sillies” in his head. Sillies are little catch phrases which you spurt out and laugh at hysterically, regardless of whether or not it might be appropriate to the situation. They included things like “have a banana” and “sense sense to Marc Segar” as well as including silly sounding words or jingles off the TV. The whole of the class would find it hysterical. Also, making the rest of the class laugh was something I was irritatingly good at. It was always the teacher’s job to put the breaks on.

Together as a class we were all being taught to say hello, goodbye, please and thank you. The emphasis always seemed to be on courtesy and independence and in many ways, I didn’t really feel as if I was at school. I gradually developed this un-informed image in my mind of what it was like in suppositively “normal” schools. In secondary schools the work must have been really advanced. Everyone had to learn French, trigonometry and algebra. I was under the impression that whatever I was doing, people in normal schools of the same age were doing much more difficult work.

## Chapter 2

I believe that despite the effect going to special school had on my self image at the time, I was infact happier there. It was a very protected and sheltered environment in which the work would cause me some but not too much anxiety and the other children were not too cunning for me.

In the same class as me there was an older girl called Sammy. Her speech was quick and monosyllabic but she had rituals and noises which were like soothing background music which went on all day. I fell hopelessly in love with her one afternoon when she put her finger on my nose. In later years we used to rub cheeks or squash our noses together under the relentless disapproval of various members of staff.

For much of the time, we would be going on outings which involved shopping, cooking, washing up and various other activities concerned with personal independence. In many ways, I would say I was lucky. I was in a controlled environment where stresses and demands were given to me in just the right amounts and I had plenty of advantage over my classmates.

On the other hand, I would look around me and see all these children who would bite their own hands, bang their heads and make bizarre vocal noises. This always led me to the same question “what the hell am I doing here?”. Some of the staff, but by no means all of them, would treat me as if I was a much younger child. A small number of them might even have thought I was merely pretending to be disabled so that I could take advantage of the system. It’s funny how normal I could appear on the outside, only to say something completely inconsistant and out of context two minutes later.

I used to hang around with my sister’s school friends in the street after school and during the holidays. We would spend most of our time on bykes, riding over ramps at high speed, climbing ontop of walls and talking about how old we were and which schools we went to. I was happy to say the name of the school I went to but to talk about it any further than that was to risk disclosing a deep dark secret. Every time I got onto the minibus in the morning or jumped off in the evening I would worry about my friends finding out that I

was slightly handicapped. What a horrific label that would be to have to endure. This is something which they later found out about through the grape vine, but it seemed to make very little difference.

Looking back on it all, I find myself wondering how on earth I managed to belong to this small group of friends. Perhaps it was because there were usually about five of us, the perfect number. Perhaps I was merely lucky that they were a welcoming group. Then again, it may have been because my mother didn't object to everyone playing in our back garden. Experience tells me that a group of people either accept or reject you but once they have made up their minds, they seem to stick to it. Their attitude towards me, whether positive or negative, seems to have little to do with the general level of intelligence or moral understanding in the group and at certain points in my life, I have been at the fifty-fifty stage in that half of the groups would respond negatively towards me and the other half positively.

My sister was at least as eccentric as myself in that she was very easily annoyed. It was almost as if she had a bright green explode button which everyone could see and which many people were always tempted to press. We were both as targettable as each other. One of our street friends, Bradley, used to come round every day during the holidays and play us off against each other. He was cunning, devious and proud.

When I wasn't involved with friends, I would be doing lots of little projects on my own at home. For about two years I used to draw mazes. I also spent a lot of time making mixtures in coffee jars which included tea-leaves, grass and mud. I would leave them behind my bed and forget about them. When me and my sister were left in the absence of anyone else to play with, we used to string up dolls and teddies to the banisters, stick pencils in them, drown them and spin them round on a piece of string.

I soon became very interested in my new ZX spectrum and began to write programs in basic. It was not long before I was writing my own computer games. Around the same time, I taught myself to play the keyboard. It was perhaps because of skills like these that my sister's school friends continued to be interested in me. One friend in particular, Douglass, was very interested in what I was doing and seemed to be very tolerant of the fact that I

didn't really know how to show an interest in him. Unfortunately, we lost touch when I moved out of the area.

## Chapter 3

Emma and I had moved on from torturing dolls and teddies and had begun building lego colonies all over the house. We called our latest game “punishing Hitler”. A lego man with a mustache would represent Hitler and the rather grand and elaborate Lego city around him, with about 20 individual characters in it, would be constantly punishing him whilst having to defend their city against extra-terrestrial attack. They even had a colony in the garden which they would travel to in a small cabin which slid down a taught piece of string which led from the bathroom window to the trunk of the apple tree. The lego game eventually drew to an end when I decided I was too old and grown up for it and this made Emma quite upset.

There were in fact quite a lot of things which I used to opt out of because of feeling too grown up. These involved many kinds of group activities such as singing, drama sessions or joining in with games. Group activities were something which took place quite a lot at a family support group we had joined called Kith and Kids.

It was not long after I had been diagnosed as autistic that we started going to Kith and Kids events. It includes not only the families with at least one disabled member but also the volunteers, work-shop people, program planners and organisers. We always used to have an excellent time as a family at Kith and Kids, always keeping busy, never bored.

Perhaps one of my favorite activities at Kith and Kids as a child was building castles out of boxes for the other children to climb inside and explore. Kith and Kids was one niche of many that I was encouraged to participate in.

During my time at special school I would be integrated part time into other, more mainstream like schools. These included the local primary school and Durants special school in North Enfield. This was a school for children and teenagers with general learning difficulties and behaviour problems, most of whom were able to speak quite well and could read.

There was quite a lot of gang formation at Durants and one gang in particular used to harass and threaten me. However, I was usually able to diffuse the situation because at this school, at least they weren't too quick witted for me. However, it was at times like this when I began to ask myself a very useful question. Why do people choose to be nasty to each other? Why do these bullies harass me when I've done absolutely nothing wrong to them? Given the choice between complementing and insulting someone, why do people so frequently opt for insults? It was as if my mind was now so tuned into logic that I had forgotten my instincts completely.

I now explain negative human behaviour in terms of survival of the fittest. People seek to eliminate others when their natural instincts percieve the threat of competition. It's actually quite funny how every time I've left one place to start with a clean slate in another, I've assumed that this problem would just go away, never to be seen again. Only in recent years have I actually realised that this isn't the case at all.

## Chapter 4

During my last two years at Whitefields my teachers were men. This was probably much more valuable than I realised at the time since they have given me quite a good reference point from which I am now able to understand myself as a man. They were sensitive, enthusiastic and wise. To begin with, I would show off to them with silliness and arrogance, seeing them almost as rivals, but in the long term, silliness rarely matches up to wisdom.

Having been prepared in this way for two years I was seen to have out-grown Whitefields and reluctantly, I was transferred to West Lea which was a school which operated like a main-stream school in most ways but with smaller classes. Many of the children at West Lea suffered from physically oppressive disorders such as asthma, some suffered from dyslexia but at West Lea, we were altogether quite a well acquainted little community.

Gradually, but not straight away, I was accepted by my classmates. Perhaps one of my closest friends was Nigel, a boy with similar problems to me. We both enjoyed talking nonsense and singing silly jingles together. However, other class-mates would keep on reminding me that this silliness needed to be discouraged not made worse. This is something I found oppressive and fun-killing. I just thought it was so good to see him enjoying himself. Everyone always seems to have this irrational impulse to stamp out and destroy all nonsense and autistic humour and replace it with hard competitive wit games.

Together, Nigel and I learnt the lyrics to about twenty jingles from adverts on TV, put the first 35 elements of the periodic table into a song and recited PI to 17 decimal places.

During all this, a rather attractive girl who was new to the school took to me, perhaps because of my rather unoppressive persona. She seemed to have problems handling her emotions and her affections. Every day she'd dump me so that she could get back with me afterwards. The larger, more dominant boys in the school used to come up to me and give me arrogant pats on the

back, asking me for manly advice. I would respond with mostly indifference, probably because of not really knowing what to say.

With regard to work, I suddenly became extremely swattish, sometimes working 5 hours a day during holidays and weekends. During my spare time at school I would program myself with foreign languages, memorise the jargon from mini-dictionaries on science and write out long lists of dates and events throughout history. I was suddenly obsessed with being hyper-intelligent, elitist and snobbish. Snobbishness was the stereotype which came free with the persuite and I was constantly amazed at just how un-impressed people could be.

Some people befriended me, some people harassed and bullied me, some people nagged me and some people simply tried to reason with me. It was just extremely fortunate that I happened to be with probably the most diplomatic and agreeable students in the whole of the school's history.

Every day, on the way to school, I used to have to walk past the local ex-grammar school called Latymer which produced the most outstanding exam results in the borough of Enfield second to Southgate. West Lea was at the other end of the scale. Every morning I was surrounded by all these Latymer pupils, quite often talking about their work and asking each other questions which I would sometimes be desperate to answer for them, just to show them that there were brain-boxes at West Lea too.

Before long, we were all preparing to take our GCSEs in Maths, English, Science, Home Economics and French (basic level only). This was the entire content of GCSEs the school was able to provide with its limited size. To begin with I was even exluded from the GCSE English course. I felt very resentful at just how limited my options looked at the time. Also, there were various teachers who would constantly try to justify the situation, often by suggesting that I wasn't intelligent enough or efficient enough. It was almost like some kind of a test. The question was, just how strongly did I believe I was capable of taking a larger range of GCSEs.

There was one teacher in particular, the French teacher, who firmly supported my claims and helped me to fight for what I believed in. He and I used to spend many hours of the week conversing in French and he was



certain that I could go in for GCSE French to a higher level than the one provided by the school.

Relentlessly, I carried on the battle, refusing to accept that I was useless until finally, I was permitted to take one year evening courses at my local college. At this same time, the school granted me some free study periods.

I had already revised most of the course before starting at college. I was able to get along quite well with most of the students at evening class, perhaps because my knowledge of the subject compensated for my extreme naiveness and shelteredness. At the end of the year, I came out with five GCSE's of high standard and English. I had to re-sit my English the next year during A-levels.

During my time at West Lea I was a very unusual pupil. Obsessed with cleverness and brain power but at the same time almost completely unaware of social undercurrents or the consequences of things I'd do or say. When people in the dinner queue asked me if they could go in front of me I'd simply let them. Sometimes I'd fall twelve places behind.

Whenever confronted with any kind of aggression I would be thinking the following:

“Wouldn't it be nice if people gave each other compliments instead of insulting each other all the time”.

Such a simple outlook on life is often too simple for most people to understand.

## Chapter 5

I went into a sixth form as a completely new student with a clean slate thinking “this is great, and now I have enough experience, no more having to deal with difficult people”.

This was not an arrogant thought, it is what I naturally believed at the time due to my limited experience of people. During the first week I took great care in what I said. The trouble all began the minute I decided I wanted to look as cool and confident as everyone else. Also, the sixth form common room was a jungle for showing off, roudiness and flirting. The game many people were playing was “look what I can get away with”.

On the one hand, I could say I was surrounded by bad examples but on the other hand, there is a certain kind of person who always stands out amongst the rest, not as a target but almost as a representative of everyone else.

In the end, I made such a complete mess of my clean slate that I have to admit, sixth form was nothing more than a social training ground. During these two years I suffered the same kind of rejection and targetting I had previously suffered all those years ago at primary school. What didn't help much was my refusal to admit to myself that I did infact have a disability and that I could perhaps benefit from learning about it.

There were so many things I simply didn't understand. Perhaps one of the key rules to conversation amongst young people is that they like to talk about the forbidden. This includes sex, drugs, driving, provocative films, smoking, drinking and raves. Not very easy topics of conversation for someone like me who didn't even know what a rave was, never mind a spliff or a band like prodigy.

I went out to a few of the sixth form parties and raves which everyone knew about, only to suffer immense feelings of rejection during and afterwards. I began to associate nearly all of the most popular music and especially hardcore with these feelings of worthlessness and futility. It was as if the

base-line of all the songs was saying “Marc this is not your world you cannot win”.

Perhaps one of the most embarrassing things I did in sixth form was to dance solo in the common room under the request of other people. I did it to look cool and confident but maybe also to avoid having to be stubborn. Besides, at the time I couldn't see anything wrong with it. Also, with all the complements they seemed to be giving me about my dancing, I was completely unaware that they were actually being negative towards me.

Everything about me seemed to place me into the category of “sad”, the very thing I least wanted to be. Whenever I asked people to try and help me to understand why I was being treated like this, they would probably either think I was being stupid, awkward or that I knew full well what I'd done wrong and was pretending not to.

In many ways, I felt as if I was being treated like a leppar and this made me paranoid about approaching people, never really knowing how they would respond. Of course, there were people who felt pity for me and people who even tried to help me when it was feasible but ultimately, it was more important for them to look after their own reputations and that normally involved pushing me aside. I got into the habit of escaping from the common room during break-times and going down stairs to play the piano where sometimes, I would unsuspectingly acquire an audience of younger pupils. Sometimes this would annoy the music teacher.

I became involved in the drama group and starred in two school productions. When it came to learning my lines, I was usually quite swift. I also volunteered to participate in the school mock election as the Green Party candidate where my earnest approach won me the votes of many of the more seriously minded pupils but didn't appeal to the saucy, gang-forming, football minded majority.

Public speaking made me a familiar face in the school and for the next few years people would recognise me as I walked past in the street responding with anything from friendly recognition to verbal abuse. However, despite all the anxieties I suffered at sixth form, I gave un-rivalled commitment to my A-

levels and it is perhaps this which kept me sane and gave me the hope I needed to survive these two rather merciless years.

## Chapter 6

There is a rather less oppressive corner of the world where I have always had a niche. This is a family support group known as Kith and Kids which is almost like family to me. Early in my childhood I came to this group as one of their disabled members and over the past six years, I have been a regular volunteer, always keeping active and creative.

At the age of seventeen I was already running music and drama workshops and I gradually learnt a repertoire of activities and techniques for keeping people amused. For a long time, I have needed lots of support from the organisers and program planners but gradually, I became more independent and at the same time, more creative.

Recently, I did a project in which I had the group decorate 60 sheets of cardboard, cut out doors and windows and piece them together into a maze. I had already thought up the blueprint and the procedure for constructing the maze and I took on board the task of group motivation very seriously, knowing that enthusiasm was the most important thing. The maze went up in no more than two days.

Within this highly interactive group the other volunteers have always accepted me for what I am. It is a protected environment a world apart from the cunning and brutal outside world in which it survives. Within this group, there is one family with whom I have become particularly well known. They have an autistic daughter with whom I seem to be able to identify without effort. Cartoons seem to be very much her favorite thing.

## Chapter 7

When I began at university, yet again I assumed that now, at last, I had enough experience to get by without too many problems. However, the top ten percent of the population for being educated and moralistically aware sure as hell know how to be nasty when they want to be.

As far as my course was concerned things were pretty much ok, even if I was convinced that I had to put in at least five hours of work a day OR ELSE I fail. But by no means did I want my flatmates to think that I was a swat.

I took the social life as seriously as I took my course but unfortunately, I found that the social chemistry was quite a lot harder than the study of biomolecular forces when applied to enzyme kinetics.

It seemed as if everything I did was wrong, or at least someone would have the knack of making it look wrong. There was one lad in particular who decided to make me his hate object for the year, just tutting at everything I did and never talking to me except to say why don't I move out. On heinseit, I would have seen this as a brilliant suggestion and have moved out as soon as I possibly could but at the time, I saw it as nothing more than yet another confrontation.

One weekend I left the flat to go home without thinking to tell anyone. When I got back they made it seem as if I hadn't done anything wrong but I later found out that they had been really worried in my absence, thinking that I may have locked myself in my room and departed in one of life's little escape pods. Having seen the way they were treating me I was quite surprised to find out they had actually been worried about me.

During my first year at University I joined various societies including HARM, the heavy metal and rock society. I bought myself an expensive leather jacket to fit in with the stereotype I was trying to portray but it was not long before it went missing at someones flat-warming party, never to be seen again.

I took up smoking, yet again to fit in with the stereotype. Every day I used to burn about 20 incense sticks in my bedroom, causing certain people to get annoyed with me. In actual fact, I couldn't make up my mind whether I was a hippy or a heavy. It also took me a very long time to find out where any of the night-clubs were.

It was during this year that many things seemed to start falling into place. For example, the way in which people organise themselves into a hierarchy. The fact that the rules concerning social interaction and courtship are in fact different for men and women. The fact that lads always exaggerate about how much beer they consume on a night out, making it sound as if it is normal to make a complete drunken fool of yourself in public.

Eventually, I decided I wasn't going to be cool any longer. Instead I decided to follow the advice people had been giving me for a very long time. I decided to BE MYSELF.

Suddenly, I would walk into the living room every other hour wearing a simple pullover and jeans, showing honesty and sincerity whenever I spoke. I'm not completely sure what kind of an impact this had on other people but during my second year, they would sometimes tell me I was too genuine and that I needed to put on a bit of a mask. I simply couldn't win either way.

It was during the end of the first year that I disclosed to the rest of the flat the truth behind my odd behaviours. I had to get one of the lads to confirm with me that they had in fact chosen a house to live in during the second year but had conspired not to let me in on it. This then prompted me to go and seek out my own accommodation.

Surprisingly, the flat-mate who had showed the most hatred towards me was the one who put me in touch with the people I ended up living with in my second year. Perhaps he was attempting to pay off his conscience in some way. However, it is surprising just how many of these strange little ironies life can throw at you.

## Chapter 8

During my second year at university I lived with a completely different group of people. Amongst them was Nick, someone with a very casual outlook on life, a real rock and roll rebel and someone who seemed to be extremely good at bringing women home from night clubs. He had been cut off from his first year flat-mates for different reasons such as incompatibility of attitudes. His rather brutal jokes against the socially inadequate used to make me feel quite paranoid at times but I was to learn later on that he wasn't making them out of spite, it was just an effective way of letting off tension and another of life's strange ironies.

We soon learnt to live with each other as best mates, the two of us pretty much isolated from the rest of the world sitting in front of the TV every evening and being silly. We may have been well acquainted but really, we were like chalk and cheese.

The other three students in our flat were part of larger circles of people. They left Nick and myself pretty much alone. However, there was one thing they really seemed to know a lot about and this was acid. In fact, this was probably just about the only topic of conversation we were all able to talk about. I'd ask the questions and they'd attempt to educate me, inadvertently saying things to try and put me off the idea.

When Nick had enough money, we would go to the local Rock Club and spend the night drinking, smoking, dancing and hoping to cross paths with similar characters of the opposite sex. Nick was better at this than I was and it took me the next two years to learn to accept myself as a thinker and an analyst rather than as a charmer.

On the rather down-beat streets of Manchester, drugs are very common-place and it was during this year that I became acquainted with cannabis. This is something we all enjoyed to while away the hours in front of the telly.

My reaction to cannabis seemed to be stronger than other people's. I would have experiences of time expansion, distortion of consciousness, heightened



perception of sounds, shapes and illusions. Sometimes, it would be spiked with a harder drug, making it hallucinogenic. Quite often I would find these experiences so fascinating that I would go round telling friends on my course. When back in the flat I would leak out signs of indiscretion and people would bring this to my attention, urging me to be quieter.

Cannabis has had a profound effect on the way I perceive life. It has brought to my attention many rather profound philosophical ideas which seem to challenge our very existence and individuals in a physical universe. Whether or not these new perspectives have improved my performance in life I am unable to say but they are not something I regret having acquired

During my second year, I wasn't completely lazy. I did in fact attend a counselling course with Nightline twice a week. This gave me some immense improvements in my listening skills and when it came to the role plays, people seemed to show that they were impressed. However, what I didn't seem to be prepared for was failing the entrance examination.

Perhaps I'm just not the right personality type. Perhaps I was simply unable to counsel someone whilst under the pressure of guidelines and policy telling me what I can or cannot say. I later decided to retake the same course in the third year but yet again, I couldn't get through. This time, I was able to accept that perhaps, the thing they wanted from me which I seemed unable to provide was intuition.

The third year was generally quite good. My flatmates accepted me most of the time. However, they didn't make any exceptions for me as this would automatically have been treating me differently to the way they treated each other.

Together, all seven of us spent the whole year gently fighting each other with subtle and sometimes brutal witticisms. They were perhaps the most diplomatic and mature lads I had lived with and they seemed instinctively able to find a balance between politeness and vindiction. This is why it was so beneficial for me to be living with them.

Analysing people has finally allowed me to realise just why it is that people prefer to insult each other rather than exchange compliments. It is a very good

means of giving and receiving constructive criticisms in a way which is comical, time efficient and can diffuse any tensions and barriers caused by the trap of over-politeness.

## Chapter 9

Not having been abroad very much before, and never having been on an aeroplane, I decided it would be a brilliant idea to jump right in at the deep end and travel somewhere in the world where it was about as different from home as it could possibly be. For some reason, I had set my heart of Africa.

I went to the travel agents and hastily booked myself on a Safari expedition. I turned my attention to all the official details like passports, injections, travellers cheques and the like, having little time to think about whether or not a Safari in Africa was the right holiday for me. I was actually looking forward to meeting the local people and seeing their way of life much more than thinking about the animals or the sites.

The flight to Kenya and the first two days were absolutely fascinating. I was astonished by the way the people were so friendly and forth coming, the way the minicabs all seemed to have broken wind screens and holes in the doors. I was also quite taken aback by the way all the trees and bird songs were different. I then became acquainted with the people on the tour.

Gradually, tension built up from certain people in the group who seemed to take an instant dislike to me. This was to get worse as the tour continued. I was never really able to work out just why certain people were reacting to my presence the way they were. Perhaps it was simply some kind of gut feeling. The real problem was being part of a group who were forced to live in close proximity 24 hours a day for seven weeks.

There were many chores to be done and pulling my weight was a problem. I don't think it was because I was lazy, despite popular belief. I was happy to do any chore that was assigned to me. The problem seemed to be that at a very early stage people had already decided to label me as "incompetant" and had since made it extremely difficult for me to join in with the work.

I didn't protest to them or allow myself to feel enraged because at the time, I was going through a Zen phase, reading parables every day and seeking to cleanse my heart and spirit of all hate and resentfulness.

When they wanted to refuse my offers to help and call me lazy at the same time, I would feel the open-minded and un-spoilt spirit of the local people calling me and I would stroll off and introduce myself to them. My best friend on the tour was probably the driver who was African himself. The rest of the people on the tour were westerners who probably felt that by sneaking off and talking to the locals I was putting us all at risk.

I don't think the feelings of hate towards me were unanimous. They never have been. My enemies have usually been a small minority of people who always just happen to have the gift of dominance. They watch the rest of the group like hawks, just to make sure they don't become too understanding.

Perhaps what most intrigued me about Africa was learning how so many people, at such a young age, could walk such great distances with neither food nor water, balancing something so heavy on their heads in the dry and oppressive heat of the day without even wearing shoes on their hardened feet. And they do it for such small sums of money. As a group, we took upon ourselves a long walk to the top of a small mountain in the hot baking sun with about fifty local people as our porters. My experience was shared not with the other Westerners but with the porters.

When people tell me how fantastic it must have been to have seen the Gorillas in Zaire and rafted the great waters of Victoria falls, when the truth of the matter is that I was much more interested in the local people, who I often conversed with in French, sometimes trying to use Swahili as well, I sometimes feel as if I enjoy all the wrong things.

I quit the tour ten days early in Zimbabwe where I stayed two days with an Indian family who lived in the capital city before finally disembarking for home. It seemed like I had been away for such a long time.

## Chapter 10

One year later, I went to France to work with a group of autistic children and adults in the country side around Bleneau. It was quite different from what I'd been expecting. The children were mostly suffering either severe autism, infantile psychosis, post traumatic tension or a combination of these factors. Some of them were completely resistant to any form of discipline or authority and aggression was a serious problem.

During times of very low staff to children ratios, the staff could become aggressive too, simply due to the strain of the demands which were being placed upon us.

This hostel may have been placed in the middle of a very refreshing and beautiful portion of countryside but inside the building its self, conditions were poor. This wasn't really surprising if you bare in mind that one of the older children had broken almost everything in the building which was breakable. During the day there wasn't really anywhere soft enough for the children to lie down comfortably and this is something which angered me somewhat.

Some of the more challanging and aggression seeking children were often on my trail for hours, making me very annoyed. But whenever there was a child with simple, straight forward autism I seemed to be able to identify with them without any problems at all.

I related well to the other staff who were quite intrueged to be working along side an autistic englishman. But gradually, I became more concerned with the children and communicated less with the staff. I had decided that I would spend the best part of the day playing my guitar and singing to the children, telling them what to do in song and rhyme rather than telling them off. For this, I became popular with the residents in the other block who were adults with less severe learning difficulties. I would often be there entertaining them in the evenings. Some of them would laugh so hard they'd cry. I had the perfect audience and I was a master of autistic comedy.

Slowly, my songs became more and more ridiculous. Some of the staff labelled me as mad whilst others who were more open minded would invite round for dinner, so that they could try and learn all about my extraordinary approach.

When I had reached the stage of asking myself if I had seriously regressed, another volunteer came along. He was interested in juggling and clowning and we became best friends. He made me realise that it wasn't me who was mad but it was other people who didn't understand.

I am now in the business of children's entertainment. This is in many ways quite different to entertaining people with severe learning difficulties because I am now having to deal with audiences who can be quite vindictive if you are too nice. However, I would be inclined to say that of all the jobs I could be doing, I think that doing magic shows makes me happiest. It is using almost every skill I have and forever giving me more insight into human nature, even if it is taking place on a children's level.

My social life now entails going to juggling workshops although I also attend an evening class in psychology and regularly attend groups who work with autistic children. To supplement my salary, I have a consultancy service for people who want to find out more about autism in depth.

I may now have social interaction down to a science. However, there is one thing I must make an effort never to forget and that is what it's like to suffer from Asperger syndrome.

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