Social difficulties: Cultural differences or Asperger's syndrome? [1]

Hey Alice,

Currently I'm an undergraduate, and because of persistent and long-standing social difficulties, I've began to suspect that I may have a syndrome called Asperger's syndrome. Two of my brothers are Kanner-type autistics, making me believe I might have a hereditary inclination to have autistic traits, albeit in a much milder form.

This has only been a minor irritant in the past, and I've brushed it aside as absurd since I didn't know much about the disorder. I'm nothing like my brothers, so how could I be autistic? I have ? may I flatter myself? ? an average IQ, and display what I believe is empathy; but then I realize that I have no sense of how others act or why. I always think they say what they mean and mean what they say. I'm completely oblivious to the way others view me, and have been totally ignorant of many of the incomprehensible social taboos. (Could this be because I'm the daughter of immigrants and have had a very isolated life?)

People have said that I'm honest to a fault, and I've made myself the town fool more than once by being used by people, misunderstanding the social norms, allowing myself to get into situations where erroneous and outrageous assumptions could be made, and just generally being completely socially inept.

I also do things like pace incessantly and take drives, at least once a day, along the same routes. I'm a visual thinker and an artist, albeit a rather amateurish one. These traits seem to be common to AS.

These difficulties have led to emotional and psychological trauma, interruptions to school and work-life, and serious depression. I would like to know the cause. How can I get an *unofficial* (i.e., undocumented) diagnosis? Do my suspicions have any foundation?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Social difficulties can be very painful, but whatever the cause, they are definitely possible to overcome. You describe a wide range of experiences which could be related to Asperger's syndrome (AS), but they could have other origins as well (more on that in a bit). That being said, it's best not to get ahead of yourself. Whatever the cause of your social difficulties may be, consider determining whether your suspicions are *officially* correct or not with the
assistance of a professional.

With recent changes made to diagnostic criteria, someone with AS would likely have a diagnosis that either falls under autism spectrum disorders (ASD) or social pragmatic communication disorder (SPCD). Still, it can be difficult to diagnose due to the range of symptom severity and the fact that someone with AS may simply seem shy or have difficulty with social skills. For even more information on the syndrome, check out Do I have Asperger's syndrome? [2]

As you mentioned that your brothers have Kanner-type autism (now usually referred to as severe autism spectrum disorder), it's possible that you have also inherited some of the genes that make an individual susceptible to ASD. Studies have shown that families with one child who has ASD are more likely to have another child with ASD (compared to a family without any history of the condition), indicating that it seems to be hereditary.

Though what you describe seems to be similar to the symptoms related to diagnosable conditions, your experiences could be related to other causes. Growing up immersed in two cultures may make it difficult to recognize disparate social norms in each culture. But, it could also make you more adaptable to different social situations. You mention having an isolated life, which could also have impacted your opportunities to develop confidence in your social skills.

Regardless of the cause, you deserve help and support in navigating social situations and coping with depression. Meeting with a mental health professional and talking about your personal history and characteristics will likely be a good start. Getting a legitimate diagnosis does involve documentation, but professional counselors observe strict confidentiality. Information about you will not be shared with anyone else, including family members or teachers, without your explicit consent, unless your life or someone else's is in danger. Though it may feel daunting, talking to a professional may be a way to confirm or negate your suspicions and also a way to begin working out your social difficulties, whatever their source.

Alice!

Category: Emotional Health [3]
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Related questions

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Do I have Asperger's syndrome? [9]

Resources

Nightline (Morningside/Barnard) [10]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [11]
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