

Thoughts and Observations About Transition From An Adult on the Spectrum

Possible Challenge Areas

- A. Mastering driving can be very challenging - Please note that this is often not an anxiety/confidence issue. It has to do with attention span and divided attention (multi—tasking). Some people on the spectrum never learn to drive, others have reported requiring as much as 400 hours of practice. Public transportation can be a problematic substitute –both because of the limitations of the public transit systems themselves and because direction and navigation can also be a challenge for people on the spectrum.
- B. You adults on the spectrum may not be aware of certain common-sense facts that other people seem to know.
- May not realistically estimate costs of living in a city they wish to move to
 - May have to be shown specifically things like opening credit or checking account
 - Same for housekeeping things like what substance to use to clean what surface
 - May not recognize hazardous or unhealthy conditions in a new apartment
 - Clothes: often can't tell what goes with what, or even what is dressy
 - May not be aware of how the condition of something looks to other people – such as not recognizing that an area of their city looks deserted or lacking in economical vitality
 - May not understand how to look for jobs or living arrangements in other cities
- C. May need space that is their own, and therefore may be uncomfortable sharing an apartment, or, more especially, a dorm room
- D. Social naiveté and inability to cultivate a social network that comes with being on the spectrum can create additional safety problems, especially in large or unfamiliar cities – and the young adult on the spectrum may not realize this.
- E. May have trouble with certain kinds of problem-solving: knowing where to look if asked to research something, or how to use an unfamiliar computer program or piece of office equipment. Tend to cope by asking questions, usually of a supervisor or teacher. May ask about things that other people seem to be able to figure out.
- F. May not be aware that cliques, politics, or favoritism exist in school or the workplace, as long as people act superficially friendly.
- G. May write a communication that sounds “inflammatory” without realizing how other people will take it

H. May continue to be interested in “childish” recreation like children’s books, cartoons, or coloring.

I. May tend believe what is said to them, relying on people’s words, even when the action contradict the words. Might get worked up by political or motivational speeches

H. Autism expert Temple Grandin reports that there are three kinds of brains on the spectrum. The kind of brain that is more “word-driven,” may take too literally certain kinds of verbal messages from motivational speeches, or the media, such as:

- You can accomplish anything if you have sufficient determination – and you can do it at any age.
- If you’re different as a teen, you’ll be all the more successful as an adult.
- If you’re creative, you can solve your community, school, or world’s problems. If you see a need in your community or at your school, you should do something about it, because when can-do people come together, they can do anything.
- You’re supposed to be dying of thirst for life, and want to drink up every experience life has to offer.
- Traveling and seeing the world are the very essence of “living.”
- If you want to do something, do it – don’t think about the risks or the downsides, or any obstacles, because there aren’t any obstacles, it’s just your negative self-talk.
- If you’re aggressive and bold and present yourself right, you can walk into any office and get any job you want, whether they’re hiring or not. Or better yet, start your own business. And you can even find a way to get your favorite non-profit the money they need to hire you, and create your own dream job.
- Rock the boat! Always be different! There’s never a bad time to say what you think.

This may result in a person on the spectrum reaching young adulthood with very inflated expectations for, not only what he or she can accomplish, but what they are supposed to accomplish, and supposed to want.

At the same time, there’s an inertia that comes with ASD. May only be able to do so much work; even a part-time or seven-and-a-half-hour-a-day job may feel like “working all the time” to them – may not want to come home from work and do things like chores, or volunteer work that has similar tasks to the job. May not be able to keep themselves working as long as an employer expects

The inability to develop social relationships and strange behavior in social situations is going to affect a person’s chances of getting a job – but people on the Spectrum may not see this. They may think it’s only the “bad guys” who give jobs to people based on friendship.

Strategies and Accommodations

In today's world, in which post-secondary education is required for most careers, what we usually call "the transition" is really two transitions - the transition to any post-secondary education (whether college, trade school, or the like) and then the transition from that education to the workforce. At the very least, it is a transition with two phases.

Since college allows for a combination of independence and support that allows everyone to transition to adulthood, it might seem to make sense for adult with high-functioning autism to pick a small college that offers personal attention, close to home or otherwise in a place where family support is nearby, so that they are "protected" while they start the transition. But this might mean avoiding, rather than working on, the challenges of the real world and the workplace for four years, and coming out of college not really much more ready to live or work independently than they were going in. College, by virtue of being college, is always going to be a somewhat more protected environment than you are in once you are totally on your own and working. And in fact, college can be a great environment for people with high-functioning autism.

- Give the person dorm or apartment space to him/herself (college)
- Allow them to avoid purely social events (department or office parties) that other people understand are mandatory (It is not necessary to excuse them from classes or informational meetings that clearly have "purpose" other than socializing.)
- For those who don't drive – either help them find someone with whom they can carpool, or find ways to get the same work done from a site to which they have access – like research or writing
- Be explicit about expectations: Example: a law firm may have a written policy that associates are supposed to work 2000 "billable hours" a year – while actually expecting 2400. The ASD person won't have any way of knowing anything but the explicit policy. This includes dress codes and behavior. Either the supervisor can explain these things, or maybe assign a peer mentor.
- Maybe universities should consider allowing ASD people to take a few fewer course hours than usual in order to make time for social skills and the training the like. The academic work in college may feel like a full-time job, and the student with AS may feel he or she "doesn't have time" for other activities that they don't find relaxing.
- Don't assume, and don't tell the person on the spectrum, that they can "overcome" all their challenges. Don't say things like, "You're smart, you can do X," if in fact, X is a challenge area for someone on the spectrum. Don't say, "There's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it."
- Help people with AS start interactions by introducing them to colleagues and introducing common interests. For example, if the person with AS talks about Star Trek constantly, say something like, "Oh, I'll have to introduce you to B, he's a big Trekkie too."

Other Possible Strategies

- Disclose! Disclose! Disclose – it makes a difference to how everyone sees you, and therefore, to all your relationships.
- Re-think college. From the standpoint of being employed, some ASD people might be better off learning a specific skill or trade that's more easily fit into a particular job.
- Parents and family and friends of people with ASD may need to do some job networking – although the person on the spectrum may resent this, as “babying” or unfair “special treatment.” Parents of young people with disabilities often reach out, through support groups and suchlike, to one another, for emotional support. However, also be on the lookout for people who are in the field your son or daughter is interested in, who also AS parents. They are likely to make good career and social mentors because they understand AS and have a vested interest in the success of people on the spectrum.
- There needs to be more available in terms of providing transportation for people who can't drive but who can otherwise work.
- It would be great to have dorm-like institutions where people could live after college. Not group homes – residents could pay rent, come and go to jobs, but have some assistance with safety and common-sense issues, mentioned above.
- Financial aid institutions and grant-makers should bear in mind the difficulties people with AS are likely to have with working while in college, because of transportation, time-management issues, and feeling like they can only do so much work.
- Many high-functioning spectrum people have the Catch-22 of not being considered employable, yet being considered too high-functioning for public benefits. Autism advocates should learn about the movements for state public health insurance for everyone. (There are young adults without disabilities who don't get jobs right out of college – and then they are uninsured.) See www.spanohio.org and www.singlepayeraction.org for more on single-payer health insurance plans. But if society makes the decision that the communication and social skills are so important that people with ASD are unemployable, it should be easier to be considered disabled for public benefit purposes.
- See www.lynleysummers.com to meet an amazing recent high school graduate with ASD
- Maybe “inclusion” doesn't need to be sacred for people on the Spectrum. The sheltered workshop and group home types of settings could work well for some people with autism – even though no one should be forced into that against their will.
- If a person with AS is doing the job of communicating with the public on behalf of your organization, it might be a good idea to have a supervisor or another person review communications before they go out.

Many people with ASD have a highly developed sense of social justice. Getting involved with social change movements offers the following advantages:

- It offers a group of people you know you share interests with, and base from which to start making connections.
- Connects you with other people who see themselves as marginalized by society, so they're less judgmental. But they need to know about the Autism Spectrum as another marginalized population that isn't as well-known as such, so it's a place to start raising awareness.
- The issues probably affect you, as a person on the spectrum – health care, transportation, public benefits.
- Exposes you to different viewpoints and perspectives and forced me to do some questioning (i.e., be less accepting of what everyone says)
- Being more aware of injustices makes you less naïve
- Some groups actively work to educate people about their rights up against businesses and government systems, etc, and how to protect themselves. For example, how to recognize and avoid predatory lending. Usually this is aimed at low-income people who are not “book smart,” but it might be useful to get ASD people, who are socially naïve and not “street smart” to those same kinds of seminars.

At the same time, the social skills issues of ASD can hinder one's ability, as an activist, to win people over. And the social change movements do promote the extreme-achievement-only-limits-are-in-your-mind attitude.

- Ohio Empowerment Coalition: welfare issues www.overtherhine.org
- Organize Ohio: also poverty and welfare www.organizeohio.org
- Toledoans United for Social Action: health, education, employment, and public safety issues www.toledoans.us
- Public Interest Research Groups: consumer, health care, and political rights issues: www.ohiopirg.org; www.pirg.org (national)
- Girls, Inc: mentoring, skills, and empowerment for all girls, including political advocacy on girls' issues (www.girlsinc.org)
- The political parties: Democrats www.ohiodems.org
Republicans www.ohiogop.org
- Alternatives: Greens (focused on increasing social welfare network and personal freedom) www.ohiogreens.org

Libertarians (interested in minimizing government in all areas of life)
www.lpo.org

Constitution Party (interested in limiting federal government to doing the things the Constitution explicitly permits it to do)
www.cpofohio.org)